# TRAVERS

By SARA DEAN

Tom

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TRAVERS

"WHY ARE YOU A THIEF?" SHE WHISPERED.—*Page 50.*

# TRAVERS

*A Story of the San Francisco Earthquake*

BY

SARA DEAN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR BY

W. HERBERT DUNTON

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TO MY FRIEND

ETHEL ROCK SAYERS

Lord, enlighten us to see the beam that is in our own eye, and blind us to the mote that is in our brother's. Let us all carry and measure with the false balances of love, and be in our own eyes and in all conjunctions the most guilty. Help us at the same time with the grace of courage, that we may not be cast down. When we sit lamenting amid the ruins of our happiness or our integrity, touch us with fire from the altar, that we may be up and doing to rebuild our city.

Robert Louis Stevenson.

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TRAVERS

# CHAPTER I

## A FACE FROM THE PAST

In the court of the old Palace Hotel in San Francisco two elderly gentlemen sat conversing, with the comfortable pauses of congeniality. One was an Englishman with grey hair and moustache, his face tanned a red-brown from long exposure to the Eastern sun. The other was an American, full of the breezy bonhomie of the West, with shrewd, keen eyes and a ready laugh.

Above them, floor on floor, arose the encircling galleries, pale ivory in colour, of that famous court. Chairs were set at comfortable, conversational angles upon the rare Persian rugs, and distinguished the portion of the court in which they sat from the restaurant that occupied the other end. There tables were arranged, abloom on this gala night with rarer blossoms than usual.

This blending of reception hall with grill-

room gave an individual and delightful character to this historic court, which had been the scene of so much of San Francisco's history. It told somewhat, too, of the freedom of its hospitality, and the open-heartedness that shared its gaiety as it mixed its drinks, with less reserve than its sister cities in the East.

Among the tables the waiters moved, intent on last touches, or standing idly contemplative, absorbed in a vision of extra tips the opera season presented.

Suddenly Colonel Merriton uttered an exclamation and bent forward with intent eyes.

"What's up?" asked his companion, Mr. Bell, with a look of mild interrogation.

The old soldier settled back in his broad crimson velvet chair without replying to his friend's query, and for some seconds remained motionless, a reminiscent frown puckering his brow.

"I could have sworn it was Travers," he muttered at last, breaking the silence.

"And who is Travers?" asked Mr. Bell with the persistence of long established friendship.

The Colonel did not reply at once. He felt an evident disinclination to discuss the man whose name had risen involuntarily to his lips. At length he answered briefly:

"An officer I knew in India."

"India," repeated Mr. Bell. "But where now is this Travers—or his double?"

The Colonel indicated the direction with a jerk of his head. Mr. Bell turned and beheld the man whose appearance had so evidently disturbed his old friend.

He was a sufficiently striking figure to arrest the eye even of a stranger. He had just entered the court and was sauntering about, his hands deep in his coat pockets, as if he were awaiting a friend, or were killing a few idle moments.

"Still in your army?" persisted Mr. Bell, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes, for the Colonel was visibly discomposed and uncomfortable.

"No," snapped the Colonel, and his lips set like a vise.

"No?" again echoed Mr. Bell, still intent upon the newcomer. "Poor taste on the part of your army, or bad luck. That is a soldier to be proud of. Built like a wedge,

shoulders like a rampart. Head looks as if it had brains in it, too, and he walks with the easy lifting stride of a tiger. Come, why the deuce are you throwing down such a countryman as he?"

The Colonel leaned forward in his chair, his hands clutching either velvet arm, in a sudden burst of unexpected anger.

"I throwing him down! I! Why who but I——"

He checked himself, swallowed, the rage died from his face, and he settled back again in his former position.

"The confounded curiosity of you Americans," he muttered. "It isn't Travers. I've looked a second time, and it isn't Travers."

"H'm." Mr. Bell's exclamation was expressive. "Well, I *am* glad of that, now I've had a better look at him."

The Colonel cocked a thick grey eyebrow and regarded his friend sharply beneath it. It seemed as if, notwithstanding he denied knowledge of the man who loitered a possible thirty feet away, that he wished to see him through his companion's eyes.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked.

Mr. Bell examined the stranger, a provoking leisure in his scrutiny.

"I'd want him on my side in a fight," he said at last.

His friend gave an exclamation that had a ring of triumph in it, but checked himself immediately.

"And?" he said interrogatively.

"He has the fighting quality. A jaw that tells of a will of iron, a will that would send his enemy to the devil if it came to a tug-of-war, or a will that would send him to the devil if it at once got on the wrong bent."

"Yes," urged the Colonel, his eyes bright with interest.

"He is a man to lead a forlorn hope, a man to sacrifice his all for an affection, a man, in short, who—no, he's not essentially a gambler, but a man who gives himself with such completeness whether to duty or love, or that often-quoted devil,—that on occasion he'd be like that cannon loose between decks that Victor Hugo tells us of—in place, a power for order or protection, out of place, a menace."

"You are keen, Bell, very keen," said

the Colonel after a pause. "Do you think he—a man like that—would drift, not realising for the moment——"

Mr. Bell interrupted him with a laugh of repudiation.

"He would drift, perhaps—but what he does, he does."

For some seconds the Colonel sat plunged in thought, then he said:

"You have been watching him, I haven't after the first look. Did he appear to notice me?"

"I thought as his glance travelled this way that just for the fraction of a second he hesitated, but I can't be certain."

The Colonel arose with an air of resolution.

"I'll speak to him," he said.

Mr. Bell grew grave.

"Too late, Colonel. I just saw him turn down the corridor toward New Montgomery Street.

"Confound it! confound it!" cried the Colonel with agitation, "Why did I hesitate? Something tells me I should have spoken to this man."

He took a few steps to and fro, ruffling

his short grey locks with his fingers, a trick he had when moved.

Mr. Bell regarded him whimsically.

"It is one of life's little ironies," he said, "that such convictions often come only when the other fellow has turned the corner."

"Too late!" cried the Colonel, "I don't believe it. Let us follow. We may overtake him."

Hardly had they disappeared when the man of whom they had spoken re-entered the court. He had evidently avoided them and now returned, assured of a field free from observation. He walked with the leisurely springing gait Mr. Bell had noticed, his eyes concentrated in a curious inward gaze. He went absently across the entire portion of the court devoted to the loungers, and seated himself not more than eight feet from the tables, that were crowded to-night almost upon the rare rugs which alone indicated where reception-hall ended, and grill-room began.

It was evident that the surrounding scene meant nothing to him. He was lost in a painful memory. He sat, his broad

shoulders lurched forward as if he had received a physical blow, his strong hands were knotted upon his knees: the rise and fall of a muscle in his cheeks betrayed the clenching and unclenching of his teeth; and gradually tiny globules of perspiration gathered on his forehead.

Once he muttered a few words aloud.

"It's damnable," he breathed. "It's damnable."

As he sat like a statue, plunged in painful thoughts, the crowd from the Opera began to pour in through the Market Street entrance of the hotel. In sharp contrast to the bowed figure of this man, in the throes of a great soul struggle, arose the pleasant swish and stir of the gay throng brushing past him intent on enjoyment.

San Francisco's womanhood was in gala attire to-night and San Francisco's prosperous manhood was complacent and compliant—willing to serve for the time in the tedium of this opera display, for it's bank account was a flattering one. The Golden Gate was all aglow with the gold that flowed about and through it, to the open and opening Orient. San Francisco, proud

in the possession of its high-piled buildings and growing opportunities, was doing its best to spell in purple and fine linen—security, advance!

Fashionable, or would-be fashionable manhood crushed its opera hat beneath its arm, and murmured its usual nothings to soft eyes, which were a little brighter tonight from the consciousness of charms shown to their best advantage in costumes long pondered and coiffures carefully considered.

Soon the court echoed to the murmur of small talk and low laughter, and the popping of champagne corks. It was glowing with the soft colour and film of dainty tissue, the glimmer of jewels, and the waving of priceless fans, were accented against the sharp black of the men's evening coats.

Amid the rustle and the gayety the man sat unmoved, save by the battle that raged within him. Gradually these warring voices within him grew quieter. It was not a conquest, but a stilling of the storm. He raised his head and slowly a change, growing from within outward, manifested itself in his face. His mouth set—not in resolution,

but in recklessness; he smiled—not in mirth, but in irony; and it was not a pleasant smile to see. The latent devil Mr. Bell had discerned in his face was in possession of him.

When he moved it was to lean back in his chair with a short, sharp sigh as if he caught his breath after an harrassing physical encounter. A moment later he was grimly observing the tables about him with eyes that saw all while appearing to see nothing. He watched and waited, and watched. A pervading air of breeding, and quiet undefiant strength, held in abeyance even those, who, had the atmosphere of his personality been different, would have sought explanation for the presence there of so shabbily habited a stranger.

## CHAPTER II

### A TOAST

By degrees his unobtrusive attention concentrated, more and more, upon a table near him. It was occupied by a party of four.

One of them was a woman apparently in the sixties, tall and slight, and clad in faultless taste in a gown whose graceful, flowing lines added to her air of quiet distinction. There was a burst of diamonds at her breast, and about her neck a rope of pearls. Next her was a man in the dignity of old age which still left him in the possession of unimpaired faculties. He was a courtly man, and the bend of his head as he addressed the grey-haired lady upon his right was pleasant to see. Opposite the elder woman sat a charmingly fresh and beautiful girl, whose every movement was alive with youth and vitality. Her personality

was pervaded by a peculiar richness which suggested that in the proper blossoming atmosphere her spirit would bloom forth in rose and gold like an opal in the sun. The young man who sat beside her had his back half turned toward the observer in the chair nearby, but his faultlessly fitting evening coat sat well upon his shoulders, and his fair hair had a gleam of gold in it where the light struck across it.

This young man was Chester Drexel, and it was he who had carefully ordered this supper the day before and had chosen this spot, despite Mrs. Addington's well-known dislike of conspicuousness. She had consented to this party with almost visible reluctance. Drexel had chuckled to himself as he threw his trump card—General Willoughby. He knew Mrs. Addington would relax the vigilance of her guardianship in the exchange of anecdote and old-fashioned compliment and he must have a talk with Gwendolyn if it took the last cent of his salary to accomplish it. It was not a tête-à-tête, but it was the next best thing to it, to murmur words in her ear, leaning over the back of her opera chair, unheeding the

great dramatic strains of Caruso's voice, blind to Fremstad's daring and delightful interpretation of "Carmen."

Now as Gwendolyn ate daintily of the viands put before her, girlishly frank in her enjoyment of them and all that made life full of the agreeable and luxurious, he drank in her beauty with freshened delight.

He saw a low brow under the high-piled yellow hair that wilfully conformed to no accepted mode; long blue-grey eyes beneath straight eye-brows; a nose whose independent unclassified charm gave Mrs. Addington, secure in her aristocratic aquiline, many a secret qualm; a mouth sweet in curve, with a suggestion of undeveloped strength; and a sweetly moulded chin, dimpling faintly into fascination.

Mrs. Addington was deep in the memory of the distant times before the war which the General recalled between her hushed staccato affirmations.

Drexel leaned his face nearer the provoking girlish profile beside him.

"You must answer me," he said, half in appeal, half in demand. "It tortures me, this sort of thing."

There was a tremolo of seriousness about the girl's mouth, but she flashed a half-defiance at him.

"But we must have Auntie's consent—and you know you're a detrimental."

His clenched fist struck his knee in exasperation as the flush sprang up his cheek.

"Why a detrimental? If it's blood she wants, my ancestors came over in the Mayflower, and we have Admirals and Generals and Governors enough to satisfy even Philadelphia."

"Well, you see father forgot Philadelphia long enough to marry a girl from California."

There was a little smile on her face as she broke her bread thoughtfully.

"Her father had a toll-house in the mountains near Santa Barbara, and grandmother often said there was no such beautiful sight in the world as those eight horses swinging around the corner by the laurels. It broke her heart when they made it into a Government road. She loved to cook for the passengers, and the drivers were all her boys."

Drexel looked at her, amazed at this

revelation, shocked, for an instant, dispite her winsomeness.

The girl went on:

"Father was afraid I'd do something foolish with such blood in my veins and so —I must have Auntie's consent."

"Can't you see," said Drexel, speaking rapidly, for the precious moments flew, "Can't you see that you have just the strength of character and the daring, that when we are really married and away she'll have to consent. She can't do anything else."

A faint glow dyed the girl's face, and the glance of tender self-reproach she threw at her aunt Drexel strove to read aright. Did it bode him good or ill?

Even as he eagerly scanned her face he saw an indefinable change pass over it. She drew her filmy lace scarf about her shoulders, shivered, and involuntarily her hand sought her heart.

"What is it?" asked Drexel anxiously. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No! No!" the girl answered hastily. "It's only—that man's face."

"Whose face?" queried Drexel with vex-

ation. Turning he looked over his shoulder to the man whose clear-cut profile sharply outlined against the crimson chair in which he was seated, came directly in his line of vision. "That shabby fellow? What is he doing here? Has he been annoying you?"

"No! No!" she murmured confusedly, "I can't quite tell what it is. His face struck me suddenly, sharply, with a sense of fear."

"Fear of him?" questioned Drexel.

The girl was still visibly discomposed.

"I can't tell," she answered. "It is so odd. I don't know whether I have a sense of fear of, or for him. It is haunting, somehow. Have you seen his face?"

She leaned forward eagerly, questioning her companion.

He shook his head in surly negative, jealous of this interruption.

"It is such a compelling face," she said below her breath. "Not good, I'm sure of that—but how bad; that is the question."

"Him, him!" burst out Drexel angrily. "How can you think of him now, a stranger, a nobody, when we have so few precious moments together."

The girl still shrank within herself and when she again glanced toward the man of whom she had spoken, it was with a sense of irrepressible relief that she perceived he had moved his chair so that now she only saw the turn of a smooth-shaven cheek, and the crisped curls on a well-turned head.

"Oh, don't let any thought, any personality come between us this evening," urged Drexel, his words pouring out in a surge of intensity. "You know what this is to me. My very life hangs upon your answer."

Gwendolyn, half against her will, gave another glance toward the man whose face had crossed the harmony of her girlish consciousness like a crash of chords keyed to another pitch. She turned again to Drexel, and once again his personality possessed her. Seeing him the world grew faint and far away, yet for a little longer she strove to hold her heart in abeyance. Her fingers trembled as she tore a rose to bits, petal by petal. The famous Thornton diamonds on throat and breast glittered in the quickened beat of her heart.

"I am awfully exacting," she said slowly. "Are you sure how *much* you love me?"

A throb of ecstasy shook Drexel.

"Can words tell that?" he asked, his voice smothered.

His answer won. To a woman of Gwendolyn Thornton's type they meant more than protests. Her face broke into a soft little smile of girlish submission, her eyes sought his.

"Thank God," breathed Drexel. "Let us make it the day after to-morrow. I'll procure the license to-morrow. We'll take the Limited East!"

This precipitation startled her. A deeper rose bloomed suddenly in her cheeks.

"But why so soon?" she faltered. "Why so soon?"

"Soon!" cried Drexel below his breath. "It is months away! Soon—when I'm filled from hour to hour with the dread that something will take you away from me, that something will come between us. Don't tell me to wait longer than that. You trust me, you've made up your mind, have you not? Then why not at once, if you love me?"

There was an agony of doubting supplication in his voice.

"Of course I love you," she assented, unable to lift her eyes to his ardent gaze.

"The day after to-morrow, then. Won't you promise me that?"

The silence that followed the question was filled with moment. The girl's head sank lower.

"I promise," she breathed, almost inaudibly.

He gave a choked sigh of relief. The girl merely raised her eyes and regarded her aunt, her face full of self-reproachful tenderness. Not so Chester! He sat erect in a sort of trance of triumph, striving to adjust himself to this bewilderingly ecstatic concession. It did not take long, and his mind had assimilated the present, and was working towards plans in the future, between the dropping of two rose petals from a wilting rose on the table before him.

When Gwendolyn's lips parted it was to emit a suppressed sigh.

"My poor aunt!"

"Oh, she'll come round all right," Chester said easily, although his head still swam, and he and Gwendolyn both sank into an introspective silence. He started off

on a calculation half ecstatic, half sordid. The girl beside him was frightened at the promise she had made. It was their two elders who spoke on, absorbed in their topics of mutual interest. Suddenly Drexel touched the girl's hands beneath the table. She blushed and started to draw them away. It was the first pledge of her concession, and she half resented it. It was a claim upon her, and something in her girl's heart arose in sudden protest at the thought of the claim. She had hitherto conferred glimpses of her heart beneath this man's impetuous wooing, that so fascinated and startled her. She had been as a queen upon her throne, permitting herself to be adored. Now it would be different—she had not realised how different. She looked up at the handsome face beside her in sudden perturbation. In her girlish vision she had often thought of him as a warrior, a Crusader it might be, or a daring knight of the age of chivalry, a defender of the weak and a righter of wrongs. Now for the first time a doubt assailed her, a faint doubt that she strove to smother. Scarce half a moment since she had given a promise, a

thing sacred in her eyes. Was it the sudden protest of a nature to whom the sense of possession was the sense of bondage that made her for the first time, see something else than strength in the chin, splendidly modeled, but, it now appeared to her, set in other than the quiet strength of self conquering.

Drexel met her timid upward glance and the ardour of his look sent her eyes back to the flowers on the table. His hands pinioned hers for an instant and she let them lie there, her heart-beats echoed in a little throb in her delicately modeled neck. Drexel saw the quick come and go of this beat, and it filled him with delight. Man-like, he was ignorant of the contradictory impulses of a woman's heart, and he read it simply as a tribute to him.

Again Gwendolyn's look turned towards her aunt. She saw the strong, aquiline profile, stern yet gentle, the calm intellectual lines of a long life moulding into a beauty which the features alone did not possess. Gwendolyn realised how kind she had always been—kind, if a little inelastic at times in her conception of her duty towards

this niece intrusted to her. Suddenly this move she had promised to make, took on a new complexion. Was she not deceitful? She, Gwendolyn, deceitful! Was it not a stab in the dark she contemplated?

Half resentfully she turned toward Drexel. He was looking at her, adoringly. That gaze and those handsome eyes confused her logic. Secure under the absorbing conversation of the General and Mrs. Addington, she leaned toward him.

"Are you quite sure it is right," she said wistfully. "I want to do only what is right."

A sudden flash arose in the dark eyes watching her, and Drexel's lips set. A pride in his recent victory made him impatient of these softly murmured scruples. But an instant echo of his mood was visible in Gwendolyn's face. She was as sensibly alive as a delicately poised instrument to a change in mental temperature. She looked at him, an indefinable aloofness growing suddenly in her mobile face. He hastened to adjust their relative positions.

"Do you think it wrong to love me?" he asked.

"No," she murmured beneath her breath.

"Your aunt is ambitious for you. Perhaps it is right. Heaven knows I have little enough to recommend me—except my love for you."

For an instant her fingers clung to his beneath the table.

"Don't say that," she cried softly. "It is only that she had done so much for me. So much! She has guarded me like a man and guided me like a woman. Why, she is in her office, day after day, just taking care of my affairs. That office is dreadfully dull."

"She is paid for it," was the answer that flashed into Drexel's mind; but he only pressed her hands softly and said:

"I'll try and prove, dear, that you did not do ill in crossing her will just this once —for both our sakes. It will mean a new existence to me. I can scarcely believe it now."

The music played on. About them was a murmur of conversation, but they were lost in a world of their own. In how different a world each one of them lived, these two who had just pledged their lives to each other,

at what variance were the colours their thoughts took on.

Their reverie was interrupted by the General. He was twisting the stem of his champagne glass absently between his fingers. Mrs. Addington was leaning back in her chair watching him, with a half tender smile. In retrospect, they had just been travelling back so many years together, years ripe in joys and sorrow, experience and development. Her heart went out to her old friend with a mellowed sense of sympathy and companionship.

"I have an impulse, Drexel, to propose a toast," said the General.

"Splendid," cried Drexel, starting into sudden life and animation. "Waiter, fill the glasses!"

They all raised their glasses and waited expectantly.

The General hesitated a moment. The toast came haltingly, now that he had proposed it. He began:

"Your aunt and I, Miss Gwendolyn, have been talking of this city of yours. We have been living back again in spirit to the days of '49. We were both here then. Mrs. Ad-

dington had just come around by sea to this sandy peninsula, from far-away Philadelphia. I can see your two tow-head pig-tails yet."

He turned and smiled at her.

"Don't," ejaculated Mrs. Addington.

"I was a long-legged lad who had arriver here in a prairie schooner some weeks earlier. A battered old land craft it was, with bullet holes in its canvas cover, reminders of Indian fights in the passes; and our roll call had several holes in it which tallied with unnamed graves in the desert."

The General paused a moment. Gwendolyn's face was aquiver with sympathy and interest. The mention of those past days was like a clarion-call to her, the blood of a pioneer father all aleap within her veins.

"San Francisco represented a strange collection of humanity in those days. A man's hands went to his holster with over-much readiness perhaps—but it was the man who shot first who came out with a whole skin! But there was courage here, grit, and a willingness to take as to receive blows. It was living—the enduring and the daring! A

man panned out for just what was in him. No gold bricks in those days. There have been wild times since then. There were the days of the vigilante, and the panic of the seventies, when men lost their heads in the mad rush of speculation, and fortunes and reputations crumbled in a day. Yes, California has had a checquered career despite the ceaseless yield of gold from her hillside, the sunshine and the rich alluvial soil which yields so willing and abundant a harvest, that we take, and take, and for which we forget to be thankful, as is the manner of man everywhere. Now, to-day San Francisco tells itself that it is arriving. Very different it is from the tent covered hillside your aunt and I first viewed. And it is something to be proud of, to have built up such a city, far from the center of things, cut off by dreary miles of sage brush, rock and alkali from the Eastern cities."

"Of course it is," cried Gwen, her voice vibrant with enthusiasm for her native town.

The General shook his head.

"Your aunt and I are many years older

than you, my dear, and we doubt a little. We wonder sometimes if something of the sap and courage for endeavour has not been taken from its men and women; something of its virility abated in the meaner struggles of these later, prosperous days."

Drexel was silent and only politely attentive. He was not a native of California and felt but a punctilious interest in the subject that fired Gwendolyn's heart to its center.

"We are so proud of our pioneer fathers, we daughters of California. I can't believe we'll prove altogether unworthy of them," she said half wistfully.

"Not all of you, I am sure," the old General replied, bending his grey head in courtly tribute to the girl beside him, "but it is only struggle, and a broad horizon that bring out the best in man or woman." He raised his glass. "And now for my toast. Here's to San Francisco! May she be true to her founders; may she rise above her follies!"

Gwen raised her glass, her face radiant. Her beauty had a strange rich quality. She seemed a veritable impersonation of her

native State in the warmth of her rare pervading personality; the glowing hair; the sparkling eyes; the broad, deep chest above a slender waist.

Many, seated at the tables near by, which were crowded closely together in the endeavour to accommodate the gorgeously arrayed throng, turned to look at her in wonder and amazement—she was so lovely, so vitally alive. Something in her attitude aroused them from a weariness that was beginning to descend vaguely like a mist on the gala spirit, into the stir of real living.

She did not perceive, in the burst of her warm enthusiasm, the man whose face had arrested her attention a few moments earlier. He had now turned and was looking at her. It was an objective gaze, a gaze that made no allowance for the woman nor the glowing spirit within. It was a cool, hard, soulless regard, the surveillance of a man who had slain his good angel and who had now no will to pray for its resurrection.

## CHAPTER III

### A MIDNIGHT CHAT

The homes of San Francisco's wealthier citizens lay in the Western portion of the city, climbing up and down the steep streets and out over the sand-dunes; but in the level Mission district there were still handsome houses surrounded by spacious lawns and gardens. Some few of these were occupied by the families who settled there when the district was fashionable and who had not moved when the caprice of fashion beckoned them elsewhere.

Among such residences was that of the Thornton's, standing back, surrounded by roses and heliotrope.

The night after the opera was a quiet one. The air was still and heavy. There was a peculiar waiting hush in it that was far from a portent. Such motionless air, though unusual in San Francisco, was not

unknown, and Mrs. Addington and Gwendolyn did not comment on it as they drove home through the lamp-lighted streets in their brougham.

Mrs. Addington leaned back in silence. She had observed more than Gwendolyn suspected of the glances exchanged between her and Drexel at the supper table, and she was heavy of heart, puzzled what move to make, fearing to assume an active opposition which would be too apt to arouse antagonism in a girl of Gwen's years and spirit.

Gwen herself, nestled in her fluffy wrap, was lost in her own thoughts. She felt guilty, unhappy and ill at ease.

They went up the concrete walk to the house and were admitted by the butler. Still no word passed between them.

At her chamber door Gwendolyn turned suddenly to Mrs. Addington, who was about to enter her own room. Her young face was earnest, her cheeks flushed.

"Auntie," she cried, "aren't you going to kiss me good-night."

Mrs. Addington looked down at her, sharply observant, but not ungentle.

"Why of course, dear—if you wish it."

"But I always wish it, Auntie," said Gwendolyn, her lips quivering. "You know that."

Mrs. Addington, appearing taller, slighter, more distinguished than ever in her graceful, black gown, her opera coat falling from her shoulders, stooped and kissed her on the forehead.

Gwen's arms folded about her in a gush of girlish loving.

"Such a cold kiss, Auntie! Don't say good-night like this. Come to my room for a while. Celeste will have a bright fire. I know how you despise fires, but it will be cosey for a little talk. Come!"

Mrs. Addington looked down at her searchingly. She could not understand Gwendolyn though she conscientiously strove to do so. To her Mr. Drexel was underbred and over-emphatic. She wondered at Gwendolyn's evident preference for his society. The lack of understanding between her niece and herself was not a question of age, but of temperament. At eighteen Drexel's personality would have been distasteful to her. She instinctively

felt for the self-controlled natures, just as she knew Sèvres by intuition, and had a fastidious taste in the selection of menus, though her own palate relished only the simplest fare. There was an exuberant wealth of temperament in Gwen that puzzled her. At times she felt tempted to think it a taint of the wild, Western blood she inherited from her mother, and to disapprove of it as lacking in the quality that flowed in her own Philadelphia veins. At other moments, when she saw more clearly, the fact was shadowed forth to her that that abounding, believing richness of nature, while it might blunder madly, might at the same time touch heights to which her own well-regulated individuality could never aspire.

So to-night she looked into the girl's face, wondering and puzzled, the sense of her responsibility weighing heavily upon her. She was anxious to do her duty to the full.

"Yes, my dear," she said, turning toward Gwendolyn with her usual graceful dignity, "if you wish."

Within the room the fire was gleaming and crackling, although the temperature

did not demand it. Gwendolyn loved to return to these leaping, welcoming fires.

The French maid was sleeping in a huge chair before it, and arose with a flutter of apology.

"Never mind, Celeste," said Gwen, "it's dreadfully late. It was careless of me not to tell you not to wait for me later than twelve. You may go now and I'll manage alone to-night."

"But mademoiselle's gown unlaces in the back," Celeste protested.

"Mrs. Addington will help me. Won't you, Auntie?" asked Gwen.

"Certainly, Gwen," answered Mrs. Addington, warming her long, slender fingers absently at the fire. Then she sank into the deep chair Celeste had just deserted, with an air of abstraction, and threw back her opera cloak.

Gwen came and knelt on the floor before her.

"How nice," she said. "Celeste is gone; we're all alone, and now we can talk. Unlace me, Auntie dear."

Mrs. Addington did so, her hands a little unsteady. She was hoping ardently that

her niece was about to confide in her, and she longed for, yet dreaded the narration. She pulled the long silken lace through one hole after another, and yet Gwendolyn did not speak. She was soon nestled in the white fur rug in her filmy blue dressing gown: and then it was she laid her arms across Mrs. Addington's knees and looked up at her, the fire warming her fresh, young face which looked serious enough as the deep, grey eyes searched the countenance above her.

"Auntie," she said at length, breaking the silence, "Why don't you like Mr. Drexel?"

Startled, Mrs. Addington sank back in her chair. Her inclination was to retire behind the screen of her habitual reserve, but she smothered it with an effort and gently ruffled the curls on the girl's forehead. She would try not to drive any confidences away.

"How do you know I don't like him," she asked.

"I feel as if you didn't," said Gwendolyn wistfully, suddenly lowering her head so that her face was invisible.

Mrs. Addington hesitated before she replied. She was anxious not to speak unwisely.

"Does he impress you, my dear, as a man one could trust altogether—with one's life, one's fortune, one's—happiness?" she asked.

Gwen hesitated, searching her heart before she answered.

"Yes," she said at last.

Mrs. Addington gave a little discouraged sigh that she hoped died in her breast before it reached her niece's sharp ears.

"There is much to say, Gwen," her voice growing a little colder despite her efforts. "He is a handsome man—of a type. I admit that. Young girls hardly realise themselves the glamour which always surrounds good looks, and how slight a strain of stern actualities they'll bear. But I've heard rumours of him—I'd rather not repeat them to you—that make me reluctant to have your name associated with Mr. Drexel's."

Gwen watched her, her eyes wide in speculation. She had a young girl's usual opinion that her elders were stern and nar-

row in their views. What could she have heard against Chester? She felt sure that her aunt was unjust, and a sense of loyalty to the man to whom she had plighted her troth made her forbear to urge her to further explanation.

She rose and went to her desk. Her back was toward Mrs. Addington, who could see her two heavy braids of yellow hair shining in the light. She began trifling with her paper knife.

"I think you are unjust to him," she said.

"Possibly." Mrs. Addington's fatal reserve was beginning to grow on her.

"Men aren't all saints," went on the girl over her shoulder. "I don't like saints."

"You haven't the slightest idea of what you are talking about," said Mrs. Addington.

This was the worst line of argument in the world to employ toward a girl who did not know. Gwendolyn's championship of the man, attacked so vaguely, doubled in intensity.

"He never says horrid things of you," said Gwen.

"I hope not—to my niece," replied Mrs. Addington frigidly.

This reply made Gwen's sense of disloyalty to her aunt rush over her overwhelmingly. The tears sprang to her eyes.

"If you had anything to say against him," she cried, "you ought to say it right out, and if you haven't it isn't fair or kind to speak at all."

Mrs. Addington rose and took up her opera wrap, preparing to leave.

"My dear," she said, "it is very hard for us older people to deal with impulsive young ones. We don't wish to burden them or shadow them with the knowledge of an ugly, unsavoury world too soon. We seek to spare them. Perhaps we make mistakes in our too great wisdom and love. God knows!"

Her voice broke suddenly and she stopped, her cloak trailing from her arm, her head bent in heart-weary introspection.

Gwendolyn rushed to her, all penitence, and threw her arms about her.

"Oh, Auntie, Auntie," she cried, "love me always. I am not sure, sometimes, that you love me at all."

Mrs. Addington patted the head on her shoulder, holding it against her with a tenderness rarer in her than she realised.

"Not love you, Gwen," she said. "I've loved you always, ever since you were a wee tot of a baby. But, my dear, it may be that sometimes my conscience, my too great anxiety, gets in the way."

She held Gwen away from her, looking into her eyes with deep affection.

"I've a Puritan conscience, I suspect. I felt the responsibility too keenly perhaps. It may be I've tried overhard—and missed it somewhere."

"Oh! no!" exclaimed the girl, clinging to her, "don't say that. I love you dearly, dearly!"

"There's comfort in that, my darling," said Mrs. Addington. "There's comfort in that. But sometimes it comes to me, almost as a conviction, that more impulse and less calculated endeavour accomplishes the best results in the long run."

Gwendolyn accompanied her to her door and stood there lingeringly.

"Aunt," she said, "you've always done the best for me."

Mrs. Addington paused on the threshold of the room.

"The best I knew," she said gently, "the very best I knew." She stood there reflecting a moment before she spoke again. "Gwendolyn, I've decided in future to take you more in my confidence in business matters. There would be companionship in that, wouldn't there?"

She looked up, an earnest wistfulness in her expression betraying an innate loneliness Gwen had not even suspected.

"I suppose there would," said Gwen doubtfully, "but you're so clever, and I'm so dreadfully stupid."

"I fear I'm stupid, too," replied Mrs. Addington, but she smiled brightly. "We'll begin just a little to-night. I'll tell you the word that opens the safe. Opera. Five letters, you see. I've often felt it would be better if it were known to you as well as to the typewriter, Miss Ross, and to me only. Remember!"

"Opera," repeated Gwen absently, for her long continued indifference to her own business affairs made it difficult for her to rise at once to this new responsibility.

"Good-night, dear, will you *always* love me?"

"Always, my darling," said Mrs. Addington fondly, as she kissed her.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FACE AGAIN

Gwendolyn was too excited for sleep. Instead of seeking her bed, she seated herself by the window, watching the slow passing of the night. The cinders dropped into the hearth with little smothered noises, but still the girl sat, her hands clasped about her knees, thinking with a heavy heart.

The longer she weighed the situation the more it took on the complexion of treachery and deceit. Half against her will the thought again and again occurred to her: Would it not have been more honourable for Chester to have first sought her aunt's consent and if she then proved obdurate, they, so sure of each other and their mutual love, might then take the step they now contemplated.

The same fluttering doubt of him arose

in her mind, which had assailed her for a moment the night before, as he sat beside her.

"What shall I do?" she whispered to herself, her hands pressed close against her cheeks. "What shall I do? And I've given him my word."

The suggestion was gradually borne in upon her that there was something in Chester's own personality that won her over to mental attitudes and to concessions which were foreign to her natural bent. When she was with him her usual clear-cut views were blurred and he loomed larger in her heart-horizon than he did when she coldly reasoned out his arguments alone.

She rose and walked her room in a maze of tangled doubts and conflicting impulses.

"Oh! What is it?" she exclaimed aloud. "Am I half-hearted? weak? incapable of sustained emotion? I never used to be."

Poor Gwendolyn could not calculate, in the ignorance of her girlish heart, on the element of mere physical attraction which men of Drexel's character may possess temporarily, even over women of her pure nature. Not recognising it, she did not

count upon its influence, and so the magnetic needle of her judgment quivered all awry and her world was out of joint. Her love for him she never doubted. He was still draped in the cloth of gold she had woven for him out of her girlish fancy; he was still her knight, if her eyes strained hazily, unable to read with clear-cut discerning the words graven upon his shield. The fault was hers, she told herself.

Once she stole into her aunt's room and looked at her as she slept. The night taper which Mrs. Addington always kept burning revealed the face on the pillow, hollower, greyer, older looking than when the alert mind was active behind it. For an instant Gwendolyn knelt down and laid her cheek softly beside it.

"Don't be angry, darling," she whispered, "one day you'll see him with my eyes and be glad."

Later the thought of her own head resting beside the grey one on the pillow was a comfort to her.

At half past four o'clock she sought her bed and fell into the sound slumber that precedes the dawn.

Its faint greys filled her room when she awoke with a start of terror. For an instant she sat up bewildered, not knowing what had awakened her. A cold perspiration sprang out on her forehead, and she clutched the bed-clothes, listening, her ears strained to the uttermost.

Then she realised what had called her back from sleep. It had been no sound or movement. It was a sense of impending danger, of hovering menace! It was in the air!

She lay back on her pillow, her heart beating like a trip-hammer. It seemed to her she waited an eternity. She instinctively feigned sleep though her eyelids twitched and her mouth quivered. She was spell-bound. She could not call nor move.

There it was—a stealthy step in the passage. Into her mind flashed the recollection of her jewels, a fortune carelessly littering the dressing table. Bitterly she repented her thoughtlessness, while she lay, cold as death, striving to quiet her heart that she might clearer hear the ominous movements in the hall without. Her blood

beat on tumultuously, tapping her ear-drums with muffled thumps.

She was almost ready to scream with the strain of the waiting silence, when again there was a slight stir in the hall.

The door-handle turned softly!

She strove desperately to keep her eyes closed; but in vain. She half opened them to perceive a dark figure behind the widening crack of the door. The man without was cautiously slow in his movements. By the faint light of the dawn she saw his black bulk in the shadow. A few inches at a time, the crack widened. The hinges creaked faintly. The man stopped and listened. She could hear his breathing. Then boldly he pushed back the door and entered the room.

It was true! It was true! she told herself. She was awake and this nightmare horror of years was incarnate at last. If she could but control her twitching lids. She had already perceived that the man was tall and broad, abnormally so he seemed to her, and that he was undisguised. A soft hat drawn low over his forehead was the only effort to shield himself from possible recognition.

He paused beside her bed and she knew he was watching her. Surely he must hear the tap, tapping of her heart, though she lay like a statue. Was it a few seconds or an hour? He had moved. She heard the soft stir of his footsteps on the rugs as he went toward her dressing table. She opened her eyes and watched him.

The morning was upon them. A sudden flutter of the window curtain let in a long slit of light to play upon the facets of the gems. A strange hour for burglary! Even amid the terror that possessed her the thought glimmered that probably her long vigil at the window had delayed this man's plans.

He held up her tiara and turned it about in his hands. There was calm, possessive contemplation in his scrutiny and his attitude.

Her tiara! Her beautiful, favourite tiara! How often it had crowned her braids despite Mrs. Addington's protest that such grandeur ill-became a girl of her years. A flash of hot indignation cut across the blackness of her fear; and it began to subside. She watched him with intent eyes

as he leisurely examined her gems with discriminating regard. The courage of her grandmother, who had stood off roadmen at the point of the pistol, began to surge above the softer flow of the blood inherited from her Philadelphia ancestors.

He stood there large, contemptuously unafraid.

She sat up in bed and observed him, her heart gradually slowing in its beat. She had begun to detest him with a completeness that was rapidly eclipsing all sense of fear. Her jewels—they were her jewels! That was her graduation ring that he was calmly placing with the others, in the gaping pockets of his coat; now the long shining line of a diamond necklace slid, snake-like, into its depths. Her cheeks began to burn with sheer fury. Again he looked at the tiara.

Her voice arose in sudden protest. The man turned with a start to find the girl sitting up in bed a picture of indignation.

"You dreadful man," she cried, "take the rest if you will, but leave me my tiara."

He gave a smothered ejaculation, stared

at her as though he could not credit his own eyes. Then, wonder of wonders, he laughed softly below his breath. He looked grim enough, towering in the half light, and the old fear began surging back over her; but having once spoken she felt an irresistible impulse to stick to her colours, though her voice began to shake now that she felt this unknown lawless man's eyes fairly upon her.

"There's a fortune there and it all belongs to me. I'll give you the rest, but I do want my tiara," vainly struggling to steady her voice.

"Well, I'll be hanged," said the man at the dressing table, in what appeared to be amused amazement.

Her heart redoubled its beating, but she sat looking straight back at him.

Could it be there was a trace of conscience in that sinister figure? He hesitated.

"Thanks," he said mockingly, but he laid the tiara back on the dressing table and turned toward the other gems. A certain leisurely assurance had gone from his manner. He went on with troubled haste.

"Don't scream," he said. "I don't want to draw my revolver."

Gwendolyn watched him, her eyes widening. He looked vaguely familiar! Where had she seen those broad shoulders before? Suddenly she uttered an exclamation.

The man turned with a lithe, quick movement, on the defensive in an instant.

"Silence," he whispered.

"I know you, I know you," cried Gwendolyn over and over again.

The man came toward her and leaned over the foot of the bed.

"Silence, I tell you," he muttered.

"I know you," babbled on Gwen, half hysterical. "You're the man I saw last night in the restaurant."

They stared wildly at each other, motionless, each awaiting the next move. She could hear his breath catching in his throat. Her own came gaspingly. The morning was brightening and the features of each grew clearer to the other. As his face became more distinct the impression she had first had of him, so startlingly clear and sudden then, again recurred to her.

She put her hand to her throat. The

question seemed forced from her. Her voice was faint and breathless.

"Why are you a thief?" she whispered.

The man cringed as if she had struck him, his broad chest contracting suddenly. He started toward her as if to smother her voice. She was afraid, horribly afraid, yet she looked back at him bravely.

"Why are you a thief?" she repeated.

The man half reeled.

"My God!" he muttered. "My God!"

Then again there was silence while he stood there as if faced by a ghost, petrified into inexplicable silence.

## CHAPTER V

### MOTHER EARTH INTERPOSES

It was a strange duel of souls. These two in the half darkness fought a bloodless fight, personality against personality.

"Would he never move again?" thought Gwendolyn, noting the emotion he strove to conquer.

She had sent her shot to the quick of his being, into the vitals of this strange burglar's soul. She saw that, and still her courage waned and did not wax at the sight. The strain had been too severe.

"Go," she gasped, "do something."

But Nature now took her hand in this strange interview. Two sharp detonations sounded like the booming of artillery. A second later and the whole room vibrated, suddenly, with a sort of sullen determination. The chandelier swung violently, scat-

tering the globes afar. Gwen's dressing table tottered, danced forward, bowed and fell, hurling its burden of silver and glass in all directions. The book-case advanced a few feet into the room, then capsized, scattering a rain of volumes. The clock and two tall vases on the mantelpiece began a strange jig—reeling, drawing nearer to one another, retreating, bowing and becking in Bacchanalian fashion. The windows rattled madly in their casings as if shaken by a frenzied hand, then sash by sash, the glass shivered.

Gwendolyn clung to her brass bedstead. It was moving from side to side with a violent motion that threatened to throw her out upon the floor.

The burglar reeled and grasped the foot of the bed for support, took a step and lunged with a heavy roll against the wall near by. At the same moment a picture above him fell with a heavy crash.

Around and about sounded the jarring rush of falling brick.

The shrill screams of the servants on the floor above reached Gwendolyn's ears; and then gradually the fact stole over her con-

sciousness that beneath and pervading all the scattered many-voiced pandemonium of sounds was the long, hollow, subterranean rumble, constant, deepening, but never ceasing—the ominous roll of the earthquake.

Gwendolyn prayed in gasps, clinging desperately to her heaving bed, all impressions blotted out, save the present all-absorbing fear of Mother Earth, turned on the sudden into an enemy and a menace.

A beam crushed through the ceiling above her head—then another. The writhing, jarring earth seemed to renew its fury and take on an added determination to annihilate. A rain of bricks began to pour into the room upon the bed, upon Gwendolyn.

Without a word the burglar flung himself toward her, sheltering her with his broad shoulders, deflecting the flying missiles as best he could. The air was full of mortar. His hands closed over her mouth, to keep out the floating, smothering grey powder.

The earth twisted, writhed, jarred on like a creature in torture; then suddenly all was still.

Gwendolyn opened her eyes. Bricks lay scattered about her; the room was a wreck; great zigzag cracks crept up the wall from which patches of plaster had fallen, leaving grey, jagged scars.

The man was shaking the plaster and bricks from his shoulders; the blood was trickling slowly from a wound in his cheek; his hands were cut and bleeding.

Gwendolyn sprang from her bed with a sharp cry.

"My aunt, my aunt," she cried.

"I'll go to her," said the man.

She hastily slipped on her dressing gown and followed him.

The door of her aunt's room was closed —jammed in its casings. Within silence. The clatter and screams of the servants came to her in their bolt for the open.

"Auntie, auntie," cried the girl, beating the door madly, with weak, white hands.

The man placed his shoulder to it and heaved. It resisted. The sickening reek of smoke and burning cloth began to creep out to them.

"It's fire—her night taper," cried Gwendolyn, her fear mounting to frenzy.

The man hastily gathered a rug into his hand and attacked the resisting door. It yielded. He entered. He turned to her suddenly.

"Go back," he cried imperiously.

The flames within the room leapt out to meet them.

He fought them back with the rug and subdued them somewhat.

She cowered in the hall, feeling he fought best alone. A moment later an exclamation fraught with horror, the horror of a strong man, came out to her. She reeled against the wall.

The man had reappeared. He looked sick and faint. His first movement was to draw to the shattered door.

"My aunt!" cried the girl, striving desperately to pass him.

He held her back with curious tenderness.

"No use," he said huskily. "The chimney fell full upon her. She knew no pain."

"My God!" cried the girl, covering her mouth with both her hands to keep back the scream, her eyes mad with horror. "We must get her out," she said with her next breath.

The names were now leaping high in the room within!

"I'll try," said the man.

A moment later he staggered out gasping for breath, and shielding his eyes with his hands.

"No use," he said, "buried too deep. We'll all be cremated in this hell."

For the first time Gwendolyn dimly perceived that the flames, started in the back part of the house, were leaping toward them angrily.

"I won't leave my aunt," she cried, half faint but unyielding.

He took her in his arms and sprang with her towards the broad staircase. The heat of the fire smote her smotheringly as she struggled.

Out of the front door they went. The street was full of terrified people scattering madly without design.

The man laid her on the lawn. She turned over with a moan and buried her face in her arm. The great, old, wooden house, dry with age, went up like a tinder-box.

"Take me away where I can't see," cried the girl.

"THE GIRL MOANED FAINTLY ON HIS SHOULDER."—*Page 57.*

Again he took her in his arms and strode on with her, joining the retreating crowd.

The fire-engines came thundering down the street. The hose men paused before hydrant after hydrant. No water. The mains were broken. A moan of despair went up from the frenzied people.

Already the sky was areek with smoke in half a dozen places. The sparks sprang high in the clear morning air. The sun rose blood-red.

The man stopped a moment and looked back.

"Doomed," he said in a low voice. "Doomed."

The girl moaned faintly on his shoulder; the depth of her sorrow drowned all other thoughts.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MATCH-BOX

After the long steady stride had continued block after block, a consciousness of the world and her position began to dawn on Gwendolyn.

"Put me down, please," she demanded.

The man hesitated.

"You have no shoes on," he said.

"I can walk," insisted Gwendolyn; and she did so, limping only occasionally and hardly conscious of the cold.

She looked about and behind her. The steady columns of smoke arose over the city. The people surrounding her, mostly of the poorer class plodded on, dragging trunks, bundles of bedding, or motley assortments of useless nothings grasped in the panic and flight.

Beside her, in a sort of hurried, breathless trot, his eyes wide and his white hair

flowing, went the little man she had remembered all her life selling newspapers at the Chronicle Building. Thy were comrades now!

They overtook and passed a stout woman pushing a folding bed, laden with a bundle of household treasures, and upon it sat a parrot in its great cage, sliding up and down the bars and screeching.

Gradually the thought was borne in upon Gwendolyn, numbed and crushed as she was by her own sorrow, that these people in full retreat from their burning homes after having passed through the horror of the earthquake, were strangely brave and bright. She heard no word of complaint, saw few tears. These beings, driven by the flames, went with courage and without foreboding.

She looked at the man by her side. His lips were set and his brows knit. She knew not whither he was leading her, and yet she followed him without question. This burglar had probably saved her life within the very hour he sought her jewels!

And now he was her guide—where?

She recalled her words about him; "He's

not good, I'm sure of that—but how bad? That is the question."

Now she had ceased to question. The latent strength in the man's personality took possession of her and she accepted him.

A dull wondering pain, a doubt of Chester's fate, began to throb amid the numb horror of her memory of her aunt.

Her feet were cut and sore, but the brave faces about her forbade complaint and she struggled on. She began to realise whither he was leading her—into the open, houseless spaces about the foot of the Twin Peaks.

She turned, questioning him with her eyes.

"Why do you go there," she asked at last. "I've many friends. I must go to them."

"They'll be in the parks before nightfall," he answered.

"You don't mean it's going," she cried, with a sudden leap of fierce love for this threatened town of her birth.

"A wooden city," he answered—"without water!"

He had a strange undeviating way of putting facts. She recalled with a shudder, his direct disclosure of her aunt's death that morning. All shams were down. They were straight upon the axles of circumstance, and must take their truths uncushioned.

She did not pause or question until they were out upon the grass with Twin Peaks, yellow and purple with wild flowers, rising behind them. Over the sward flitted unhoused figures, moving, restless, without distinct design or purpose in their comings or goings.

Sitting on the ground with her bleeding feet drawn up, for the first time Gwendolyn was conscious of cold; but she did not heed it. Her eyes were upon the leaping flames in the city beyond. Recalling her aunt, to her it seemed a vast crematory with its hungry lap of fire and its spreading panoply of smoke.

Suddenly she bowed her head upon her knees and sobbed.

"It can't be that it is going— —It can't, it can't——"

She had not noticed that her companion

had disappeared. She looked up a moment later at the sound of a brisk voice. A woman in a nurse's uniform stood before her.

She was not a handsome woman; she had the type of face that is vaguely designated as "Western" in California, meaning middle Western—alert, strong, determined, with an underlying suggestion of humour that overrode the worst that life had to give.

"Well, my girl," said the young woman, "you don't seem to be bothered with more clothes than you know what to do with."

Gwendolyn gazed up at her, read her aright, and understanding, smiled faintly.

"There is many another, not so young or strong, in the same plight," she answered.

"Well, if you are not particular about style, I can do something for you."

The nurse held out a man's overcoat, a cap and a black skirt. Gwendolyn slipped them on with a sight of relief. She had become chilled to the bone.

"Put out your feet," said the woman abruptly.

Gwendolyn obeyed.

"Hm! Cut—not badly," said the nurse. "Any glass, do you think?"

"I don't think so," Gwendolyn answered.

"Well, here are a pair of shoes," went on the other. "They'll do, I guess. Not exactly Paris cut, perhaps. Can't afford trimmings earthquake times. No stockings in stock just now. Not going to grand opera to-night."

Gwen thrust her feet into a pair of old woman's cloth gaiters.

"Lost anybody?" asked the nurse, her face softening.

Gwen bit her lip in silence, her breath catching cruelly.

"Well, nothing like work for forgetting," said the other woman, but her face grew infinitely gentle as she laid a hand on the girl's shoulder. "If you want to help dress babies; cook dinners; build tents; or what not; I'm on duty—Ward One, Twin Peaks, just now. Pitch in and lend a hand when you feel that way. There be work for a dozen to-night."

To help! to work! was this woman's instinct.

Gwendolyn realised it as the straight, alert figure strode away from her. It made her feel weak and insignificant. Now that they were down to the realities, what did her life signify, with its foolish charities, where women's quarrels were fostered, and envy and ambition were rife? What could she do? How could she assist?

She absently plaited her unbound hair as she reflected. It would puzzle her to do it into its accustomed coils without assistance.

Her escort had vanished without a word, and yet she had no thought of the jewels he carried in the pockets of his overcoat. Her property, under insured and heavily mortgaged, as she knew—for her aunt had been ambitious that she should prosper with the city's growth and had burdened it with the best intentions—was going up in the cinders of those leaping flames. But a feeling of the insignificance of all things material had taken possession of her. She had no care for it. She felt thankful for the man's overcoat, frayed at the cuffs and greasy at the collar, that she drew around her. But for the aching of her heart for

her aunt and the bite of her fear for Chester, she might have been almost content on this bare hillside with its shifting, restless figures.

Somebody dropped heavily at her side. She looked up with a start. It was the burglar of the morning. He had flung a huge bundle at her feet, and was sitting down mopping his brow and wiping his face that was flecked here and there with soot.

"What have you been doing," she asked idly.

She was living wholly in each moment as it passed. The thought of each succeeding hour was completely blotted out by the fulness of the pain of the present.

"Looting," he answered imperturbably, his cap aswing between his knees.

She gave a little horrified start! Again, as when he stood before the jewels on her dressing table, a fear of him awoke with her.

He saw it and smiled down bitterly at the cap in his strong hands.

"I might have told you I bought those things," he said, pointing to the bundle,

"but although I've done most things, I draw the line at lying."

She looked round at him, at the resolute profile, with the lips a little hard in their line.

"Why did you loot them," she cried.

"Because the shops would burn anyway and you must have food and protection.

"I won't eat stolen food," she cried, rising to her feet. Even her grotesque costume could not deprive her indignation of its full force.

He looked up at her quietly contemplative. He seemed to be reflecting upon facts with which her observation had no relation. His next words proved this.

"It's a great pity you're so beautiful. These are lawless times. Even those clothes haven't helped much."

Gwendolyn gazed back at him, suddenly limp and weaponless. His observation was evidently so entirely outside himself that she was at a loss.

He arose and untied his bundle. From it he took a bolt of white canvas; next a shovel which he viewed with interest; then came a frying pan; three boxes of matches;

a package of wheatened flakes; one of Quaker oats; and a side of bacon.

He turned the bacon over dubiously.

"Good in theory," he said, "but smells too far. Might be a temptation."

Next came a large package containing many layers of chocolate.

"Nourishing," he observed.

Several tins of corned beef he laid on one side. A quart bottle of salad-oil he held up to her with a smile.

"I suppose you've never met this except in mayonnaise, but taken pure it is a digestent. That alone would sustain you for days."

Gwendolyn had reseated herself and was gazing at him, her chin in her hand, beginning to feel, despite the numbing ache in her heart, an interest in his "catch."

"Are you preparing for famine," she asked without seriousness.

"I am," he replied gravely.

This was a new thought to her. She turned it over in her mind, then sent a swift glance toward the women and the babies on the hillside, and shuddered.

The sound of dynamiting came up to

them at intervals. The deep boom of the blasts echoed and re-echoed through the hills.

"It can't be so bad as that," she said wistfully, longing for a contradiction.

"Fire Chief Sullivan is hurt unto death, and the only man who understands dynamiting is out of San Francisco and can't be gotten at. If he could get here there might be hope," he answered abruptly.

A handful of nails; a hammer; three tins of condensed milk; and several pairs of blankets, completed his haul.

He was soon at work with his shovel, making trenches in the soil.

"There may be rain, and your tent is to be here," he explained briefly.

"My tent!"

"There it is in embryo." He pointed to the canvas. "And now I'll loot some lumber."

He went swinging off across the hillside. He was in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat, and he left his coat and overcoat rolled up and near at hand.

Gwendolyn watched him as he disap-

peared—then her eyes strayed to these. Into those pockets she had seen her jewels flung earlier in the day. They represented all the fortune to which she could now definitely say she could lay claim. The impulse to repossess them took hold upon her. A strange struggle arose within her. Why not! by what law of morality should she feel that she had not a right to that of which he had robbed her. She looked about her cautiously. Enough sense of her unprotected position had arisen within her to make her fear the chance glance of strangers.

Near by, a mother suckled her baby, two older children clinging to her, still in affright from their recent experiences. An old man, a pipe in his mouth from which no smoke ascended, stood intently watching the fiery sky above the city. The remoter groups were bent upon their own affairs. Already small fires were started, and there were skeleton attempts at tents, pathetically insufficient.

She hastily shook out the coats and felt in the pockets. A handkerchief; a few cents in small change; a wallet filled with news-

paper clippings; and a gun-metal match-safe with a crest in silver upon it were all that she found. She dropped the match box as af it had stung her.

"More loot," she thought contemptuously.

Her jewels had vanished!

She folded up the coats and replaced them. She was sick with a sudden sense of loss. An hour earlier she had despised those jewels. Now, their absence shook her to the core of her being. He was a thief—a common thief, and her only protector on this hillside.

She arose in a flutter of panic. She would run away off to her friends, whose houses she could still see standing secure upon the hills outlined against the sky.

Suddenly he reappeared with a load of wood across his shoulder. She sank back into her place. He must not learn her intention; she would wait until he turned his back again. She tried to fight back a guilty sense born of her consciousness that she had gone through his pockets, but a spirit of shame died her cheeks, pale a moment earlier from the morning's experiences.

He threw down the wood and began to fashion the frame of a tent. He hammered with a briskness and assurance of a man accustomed to the use of tools. How big he was, she thought. Such a breadth of shoulder. The sun shone on the crisp curls, damp on his brow. He looked the gentleman! Something in his face had softened away since last night. What was it? Was it, she gave a horrified glance about her, that amid these people of a social grade to which she was unaccustomed, already the distinguishing marks were growing faint in her eyes, between class and class.

Suddenly for half a second his hammer poised in mid-air. Then again with unmoved face he went on with his task.

She turned, and there in the dusky sunlight lay the match-box, the crest uppermost.

Her cheek turned crimson, but she tossed her head higher in the air. What! she blush before the man who had robbed her! Surely this earthquake had turned all rules, moral and social, topsy-turvy.

Tap! tap! went the hammer. Boom! boom! came the sounds from the dying city.

With surprising speed and accuracy he spread the canvas, lapping margin over margin, and nailing it into place. Then he contrived a drop of white canvas in front. It did not mean complete protection, but it was, at least, complete privacy.

Then he turned and with a deft movement picked up the match-box.

She gazed ahead unmoved.

## CHAPTER VII

### A CACHE IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

At eight o'clock the second severe shock shook the earth. There was a sudden run on the part of the scattered groups on the hillside. Out here in the open, with nothing to fall upon them, the stark fear of the swaying earth took full hold upon their imagination. When would it end? Where could they look for safety?

The fear an earthquake inspires is like no other fear. The universe itself seems turned into instability; the vague sense of a God working out His purposes, ruthlessly, forgetting the atom humanity, bespeckling the earth crust, all aheave and atremble, in one corner of one of His numberless worlds, fills the heart with an unspeakable dread; and the subterranean rumble smites the ear with a sense of one's insignificance.

Gwen sat in silence. She was numbed by the horror of the earlier part of the morning. Now the ominous roll inspired in her heart-sickness in which there was both dread unspeakable, and question; but she could die but once. The man beside her, who had appeared so brave and fearless through it all, turned suddenly ghastly.

"Horrible!" he cried, below his breath. "I want something I can fight."

He sat down beside her, for the moment all motive toward action crushed.

"Can't you get out of here?" he asked at last, with an outburst of impatient irritation.

Her heart gave a leap at the thought of leaving it all.

"I suppose I could go to San Jose," she answered.

This recalled him to the facts.

"San Jose is flat," he said with a half-laugh of scorn of all things human. "We are cut off! Why do I speak so? No telephone; no telegraph; no railway connections. We're just penned in here with the earth trying to buck us off."

The strong man baffled appealed to her

stronger feminine instinct to submit to the inevitable.

"Never mind," she said. "If it's the end, after all it must come sometime." The tears overflowed her eyes at the memory of her aunt.

His muscular hands knotted over one another.

"It's not the way I'd choose to die." His eyes swept the burning city. "Poor beggars," he said, the words born of the thought those lurid skies engendered. "At all events, we have the open."

"Perhaps it is the last shock," she said gently. "We must expect a succession of them after such a great one."

He shrugged his expressive shoulders and rose to his feet, his cool self once more.

At this moment there was a rush of starched skirts up the hillside. It was the nurse on her round from camp to camp. Her apron was laden down.

"Is that Nob Hill," she cried as she paused beside them. "Quite a palace you have there!"

"Camp New Hope," answered Gwen, something warm and human stirring in her

heart at the sight of the strong, cheering face.

"Well named," said the nurse. "I'll delegate you medical headquarters. I've just broken into a drug store and done the best I could on the jump."

She held out her apron, and exposed its contents, naming over the bottles and packages within.

"Whisky; bromide; nitro-glycerine; strychnine; collodion; morphine; absorbent cotton; iodoform; gauze; bandages; carbolic acid. Best steriliser I can run in this camp. Can you cache them in your place?"

"Oh! I'd love to," cried Gwen.

The man had already placed them, with swift accustomed fingers.

"You have a head, nurse," he said admiringly. "Remember I'm a doctor, though a little out of practice now."

"Doctor!"

The nurse's glance took him in swiftly, noting the strong, flexible, capable hands.

"Yes—surgeon," she said.

He nodded.

"Well, we'll keep you busy. Doctors have

been bobbing up like mushrooms, but I know a workman when I see him."

She was off with her usual swift stride. The man watched her disappear and laughed a low, bitter laugh.

"I re-enter my profession, mademoiselle," he said, "under pressure."

"A doctor!" said Gwen amazed. Then she paused, catching her lip and blushing.

He bowed.

"And—a thief."

She remembered her vanished jewels and involuntarily withdrew within herself.

He noted this unshrinkingly, looking at her with a scrutinising gaze that took in all the details with almost merciless accuracy.

"The Gods grind slow but they grind exceeding sure," he said. "It's too bad they waste so much time on me."

He paced a step or two to one side, then returning stood with his back turned toward her. He was evidently fighting out a battle with himself.

"I'm obstinate," he said slowly. "I hate to have my hand forced; but there are legions of fears afloat on these hillsides today. Why add to them?"

He put his hand within his waistcoat, and withdrew a package tightly bound. Bowing, he handed it to her.

She turned it over amazed. She could feel the roughness of the jewels within the parcel of unbleached muslin, carefully tied together.

"I am sorry," he said, "but the tiara is not there."

She was dumb before him. With trembling fingers she started to undo the knots of the package.

"Don't," he cried sharply.

She started, all atremble.

He flung his hand back across his forehead with one of his reckless, bitter laughs.

"God knows you were right to your suspicions, but there are other eyes than ours about. Those jewels will mean comfort to you despite what those flames can do." He pointed to the distant city and the long line of fire and creeping smoke. "Guarded, they mean life; unguarded—death."

She gave a little cry. The intangible fear that had been gathering within her heart materialised and faced her. She feared her fellow men; she feared the sudden effect of

the loosening of the bands of law in the burning city.

How alone; how horribly alone she was!

He took the bundle from her hand, and grasping his shovel, strode half a dozen loose, swinging strides to the left of her tent.

"See," he said, pausing. "This is safer than the tent itself."

He dug a deep hole with elaborated purposelessness, and with swift glances at the people about. Within it he placed the package, and stamped the earth heavily back, tramping from one point to another, bruising the young grass and obliterating traces.

"A cache in broad daylight," with a half laugh, "under the eyes of a penniless people. Reckless, I'm afraid. Very reckless!"

He stood in reflection.

Gwen could scarcely credit her senses. What was she to think in the face of this whirl of contradiction? At times an impulse born of an outgoing nature which detested shams and half measures prompted her to trust him. Then the memory of

the morning swept back like a black flood, and she shrank inexpressibly from the very sight of the handsome head and the broad, capable shoulders.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE HILL-DWELLERS

Gwen was alone once more beside the white tent. A hasty summons from the nurse had withdrawn her companion from her, and she could do nothing, the ache in her heart growing steadily, but watch the city of her birth perish before her eyes. The black, angry, thunderous clouds of smoke told her of the devouring element gorged; the white, of its recent spread. Cinders began to fall about her on the short grass.

The towering Mills Building still stood intact, tall, beautiful as a campanile. Suddenly she gave an exclamation. This tower-like erection, upon which all San Francisco had gazed with pride, was converted in the twinkling of an eye into a vast chimney. Columns of smoke began to curl from its

top, gathering and darkening. Gwen could scarcely believe her eyes. Commencing at the lower floors the flames lapped, shining out of the windows, and climbing, story by story, higher and higher. It was going! Erect it stood, unshattered, beautiful still; but gutted within by fire from basement to roof.

Gwen turned away. She felt maddened. She could gaze no longer.

The tents had gathered thickly about her, many of them consisting chiefly of a flap of carpet. Some were of sheets tacked on slight frames. Before an occasional one was a clutter of household goods, cooking utensils, or treasures. Some of the latter were pathetic in their insignificance. Beside one woman stood a jardinière, the artificial palm in it aquiver in the shock of the blasting. Near her sat a man, dazed, a dress suit case at his feet, and before him, flat on its back, was his own potrait, execrably painted, its fatuous smile mocking his present plight. Every second man or woman had saved a dog, which they had securely tied, fearing their straying. The poor beasts crouched, steeped in the fear the

earthquake engendered in the keener instincts of animals, whining miserably; and there were parrots and parrots, screeching and pert, impelled into unusual loquacity by the excitement about them.

Gwen was amazed to observe the number of phonograph funnels there were, some carefully wrapped in blankets. The phonographs had been forgotten in the flight, but these useless funnels cluttered the hillside.

There was a cheery, bustling spirit, for the most part, in the people about her. They were arranging new quarters as best they could, and to her surprise, above these crazy make-shift homes humorous signs appeared, scrawled in charcoal. "Poodle Dog Restaurant," "Palace Hotel," "Camp Never Say Die," "Rooms to Rent on the Roof."

Many fires were started, and women and men alike, cooked before them, arranging their utensils by curiously ingenious devices.

Gwen paused before a strange spread of white on the grass. It gave her a start. It looked like a couch of death, reverently sheeted. Near by, a woman stopped in her

cooking to cast a glance of pride toward this shrouded something on the sward.

"Is anyone ill," asked Gwen, falteringly.

"No," said the woman. "It's just something handsome my husband made. I *had* to save it."

She turned back the sheet. This revealed a beshelved, bemirrored arrangement, intended to be set against a wall, painted black and lined in spots with bright blue.

Gwen responded to the woman's expectant glance.

"It's very pretty," she said and passed on.

Just in the line of her advance was a shelter that caught her eye. It consisted entirely of rugs, whose rarity and beauty struck her at once.

A querulous voice came out to her.

"Dawkins," it said. "I can't have my coffee in the tin cup. It's absurd."

Gwen recognised the voice, and hastened forward.

An old lady lay back in a wheeled chair, her helpless hands crossed before her, her fair, sweet face unruffled. She was a paralytic; and patience and resignation re-

vealed themselves in every feature. A fair man, his face lined with pain, his hand on the head of his cane, sat on a bundle of hastily gathered bedding. He was directing a woman in a striped chambray dress, who was arranging breakfast as best she could. Gwendolyn knew the man's gouty figure well, but this querulous note in his voice was new to her in this Beau Brummel, exiled from the city's gayeties by his affliction alone.

"What have you in the way of food. Dawkins," he queried.

"All I could fetch and carry, sir," said the woman respectfully.

"All! I gave you twenty dollars, and is that *all* you could buy? And this nasty mess of coffee. You know how particular I am about my coffee."

"They'd only sell a little in each shop and you know I had your mother to think of."

This started the man on another line of complaint.

"Poor mother! Poor mother!" he said, a faint softening in his querulous tone. "At her time of life and in her condition,

too. It's barbarous! I wonder the Wilcoxes didn't send their carriage for us at once. Upon my life, I do."

"Perhaps they're in trouble, too," said the woman, as she handed him two fried eggs in a tin plate.

Gwendolyn advanced toward the group.

"Good morning, Mrs. Davenport," she said, with the sweet deference she invariably rendered age.

"My dear! My dear!" cried the old lady, "so you are here too. I am so thankful you are saved."

Her son had not struggled to his feet, fearing to risk the balance of the plate placed on a bit of cotton on his knees; but he looked up with an exclamation. The thin veneer of his polish had cracked hopelessly in the grip of this great disorganisation of the conventional.

"Why, Miss Thornton!" he cried. "Isn't this simply too horrible."

"Very horrible," responded Gwen, suppressing a shudder.

"Can you believe it," went on the man. "Our house is gone! Actually gone. I can scarcely credit it. We barely escaped with

our lives; and you remember our bric-a-brac, collected all over the world. We can never replace it. The loss is irreparable! And our pictures! You recall a genuine Franz Hals, a D'Aubigny, a Rembrandt, of disputed authenticity to be sure, but authentic, I'm convinced. Gone up in cinders! What a fate! And," with a sudden change of tone, "now I actually haven't a decent coffee cup."

The helpless old lady turned toward Gwendolyn, hastening to head off this flood of complaint.

"And how is your aunt, Miss Thornton?" she queried.

Gwendolyn strove to reply, struggled, but the words died in her throat.

"I can't tell you, I can't" she cried, and hurried past the retreat of rare rugs out into the smoky sunshine, sobbing as she went. She could bear it better amongst these strangers who did not know, these busy, brave, helpful people.

On and on she went until she paused, breathless. The tents had grown scattered, then stopped; and she could look back at the city aglow beneath her, and at the

houseless ones, their extemporised shelters fringing the hillside, purple and yellow with wild flowers.

Think, she dared not. She was houseless, and alone but for the protection of a burglar. Yet she turned, a sudden dread in her heart, lest she might have lost her bearings, and the fragile protection of the tent she had seen grow beneath her eyes, might be denied her also.

When she arrived within sight of it she saw the burglar of the morning at work at a fire before it. He had made a sort of Dutch oven of piled bricks and a pan, upon which bubbled some bacon and eggs. Beside them a kettle boiled, sending up a cheerful puff of steam.

"How useless I am," she said, as she came up.

On a clean plank of wood was a loaf of bread, a clasp knife beside it. He turned over an egg with a bit of flattened tin, and wiped his brow.

"I'm accustomed to camp life," he said. "It is nothing to me. I'll have your breakfast ready in half a minute. I hope you don't object to wooden plates. And you'll

learn the art of eating with a knife much more easily than you'd believe, I am certain."

He dished up the bacon and eggs, cut off two slices of the bread, placed the clasp knife beside her, and turned away.

"Awfully sorry," he said, "but the best I can do for you."

A struggle arose within Gwen. She had no appetite for the meal, though the smell of the crisp bacon rose temptingly, and she had not eaten that day. Should she ask this burglar to join her in her repast? He stood there, the tin he had just used for the eggs still in his hand. He was a doctor, too. Should she ask the physician to meat with her, or should she exclude the burglar.

She looked up and noted him with attention, but he turned away briskly and was soon intent upon cleaning the pan that was stove, cooking utensil, and all. He was a handsome man, with hazel eyes and hair of the peculiar tint that often accompanies them. His movements were alert, yet though he moved rapidly, he gave the impression of leisure. There was a soldierly squareness about his shoulders, an indefin-

able air of breeding about him in spite of his rough shirt, and the fact that he was working at menial tasks in his waistcoat.

"Won't you have something, too," faltered Gwen at last.

He poured her a cup of coffee and trickled the condensed milk into it before he answered her.

"No, I thank you," he said, without self-consciousness or abruptness. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"But——" she began.

"I have had enough for me," he said, taking a bit of nibbled chocolate from his pocket and returning it. "I'm accustomed to eating on the march."

A reminiscent frown lined his brow for an instant, and he gave a suppressed sigh.

Gwen tried in vain to eat. She made poor progress with the clasp knife, and at last gave up the struggle.

"Sorry," he said briefly. "It would have done you good to eat."

To her surprise he had already extemporised a cupboard at the side of the tent, and into this he put the food with his usual leisurely promptness.

"You're making yourself comfortable quarters," she said, smiling faintly.

He straightened with a start.

"My quarters would be a blanket on the hillside. This tent is yours, mademoiselle."

Twice he had called her mademoiselle, and not by her own name, with which she knew he must be perfectly familiar. For the first time she realised the resourcelessness of the English language, that furnished no "signorina" or "mademoiselle," to gloss over an unformed acquaintance. To have called her "Miss" would have smacked of servitude—to have addressed her as Miss Thornton would, under present conditions, have been a presumption.

## CHAPTER IX

### GWENDOLYN'S GUEST

"But I cannot stay here," protested Gwendolyn.

Something in the strength of his will made her feel suddenly imprisoned and powerless. She resented it.

"My friends are over there," she pointed towards the distant hills with a finger which shook a little.

"Where the flames will shortly be," he said laconically.

"I cannot endure it," she cried. "It shall not burn! It shall not burn!"

He pointed to the city below them.

Over it hung the great shroud of smoke, unimaginably terrific in its volume, billowed cloud on cloud. The flames sprang hundreds of feet in the air, while the fire raged, spread, devoured with horrifying

speed, springing with hungry, sudden leaps, or burning steadily and greedily. It would go in one direction, then double in its course, creep defiantly about the path of the insufficient blasting and return.

"Van Ness Avenue gives us some hope, but it leapt Market Street," he said half to himself, "and then there are the widely scattered cinders. I fear for it. I fear for it all."

"But my place is with my friends," she protested. Her heart was sick with fear for Chester. "They'll wonder about me, search for me."

"The restraints of law and order have been suddenly burnt away. The jails are open, looting is rife. See!"

She looked below and saw a drove of horses go past, released from their stables and herded by two men. Their heads were turned towards the open country.

"That is a mere expression of the conditions," he went on. "Stall and jail are alike open. The passions of greed—and worse, are unchecked."

"Do you mean to say I must stay here," she cried desperately.

"You may thank me for it one day," he answered, avoiding a direct reply.

She bowed her head on her knees, and sobbed.

When she looked up he had moved a few feet away from her and was standing gazing over the city.

"Can't you find him for me," she said, her voice suddenly faint and childlike. "He'll wonder so, and be terribly afraid. If I could get word to him, tell him; and I'm so alone."

When he turned toward her again his face looked drawn and lined. His lips moved stiffly as he spoke.

"Don't fear for him," he said. "I've learned to-day that the portion of the city in which he lives is practically uninjured by the earthquake. He is a man, and can escape the fire. You need not fear for him."

"But he will be wild with fear for me," she protested. "I cannot bear the thought."

They had spoken of Chester, using no name. They did not fence with facts. He had observed the whispered conversation the night before, and each was aware of the

other's knowledge. A man occupied as he had been at dawn would not be unaware of the destination of each member of the party he observed, and this was no time for empty pretence. They each tacitly accepted the situation.

"I'll act as I think best," he replied, after a pause. "If it appears I am not vitally needed here, and the declaration of martial law that is sure to come within an hour or two, assures me of your safety, I'll do the best I can—to find him, if you want me to do so."

Protest and rebellion rose in her, but they were shamed back from open expression by the sense of her helplessness, her uselessness. She dared so little, was so ill-equipped to fight conditions. This strange burglar, this masterful man had, for the time being, put his hands to the helm of her life with quiet assurance and authority that baffled her, bruised in spirit as she was, and stunned by sudden grief and reversed fortune.

She looked up to see a sudden brightening pass over his face, and she followed his glance to where a brisk figure, in rustling

white, was springing rapidly up the hill towards them.

"It's Little Montana," he said.

"Little Montana," she echoed wonderingly.

"A nickname for one of the famous Dr. Du Bois's head operating nurses," and he waved a greeting to the woman approaching them, with an air of respectful comradeship.

Gwen sprang to her feet and took a step or two with him down the incline.

Little Montana's face was grave, her lips set, her eyes intense. It was a soldier's face braced to enter action.

"Anything serious?" asked the man.

"Bad case," said Little Montana. "Finished, I'm afraid. Just picked up from under the pile of bricks." This woman, half of whose life was spent in an operating room, shuddered. "Nasty work! Nasty work! A ghoul! This is the limit. We must put her under a protection."

"My tent?" asked Gwendolyn, anxious to contribute something.

"Fine and dandy," said the nurse. "We'll have her here in a jiffy."

The man followed her down the hillside.

Gwen darted to the tent, and arranged the blankets ready for the coming occupant. Then her mind sped off searching for a further field of usefulness. Her eyes fell upon the tin bucket. They should need water.

She had seen the long line of hill dwellers journeying up and down to a spring some hundred yards above. Taking the pail in her hand, she started toward it. She felt suddenly alive. She had put her shoulder to the wheel!

She filled the bucket and returned. As she neared the tent she saw that the flap was back to admit a brighter light. The burglar and the nurse leaned over a figure stretched on the makeshift couch. Gwen was about to face another hideous phase of that terror-fraught morning, and her nerves suddenly quivered and broke.

The water slopped over the brimming rim of the pail as she set it on the ground in sudden weakness. The two within the tent were too much occupied with their task to observe her. She mastered herself with an effort and drew near.

"You must help," she thought. "You must not think of yourself."

She distinguished the crushed form of a woman stretched upon the blankets. Her hair was unbound, and the fragile elegance of her dressing gown, its lace and silk torn and stained, mocked her present helpless plight.

It seemed to Gwen that she could never have imagined so much blood. There was blood, blood, everywhere—about the cruelly mangled head, on the light robe. Gwen watched, fascinated by her horror. The strange, flaccid inertness of the form lying there revealed the story of crushed bones, even to her inexperienced eyes.

"I have brought you water," said Gwen faintly, grasping the tent pole for support.

"Good," said Montana, curtly. "Just what we want."

The burglar was bending over the woman.

His face had changed since Gwendolyn had seen it. It looked strange, hollow, and sunken. He was gazing at his patient, as he worked over her, in a sort of fascination, as if she held him by a spell—a spell of

wonder, yearning pity and the bond of memory.

The thought took possession of Gwen as she watched him that this woman was no stranger to him, but that she came to him to-day out of the past. What rôle she had played in that past she could not even faintly surmise, but that it had been a controlling one she never doubted after she saw the expression on the man's face.

"Shall I sterilise?" asked the nurse.

"Yes," he replied with a curtness of one accustomed to command and to obedience, "and bring the kettle. There must still be some warm water in it. We must give her a shot of nitro-glycerine. Heart is going down."

"Right, sir," said Montana.

The delicate hypodermic syringe forced the dose into the wounded woman's soft forearm. Gwen now perceived that her crushed head had been bandaged. Her face looked strange, distorted and vacant, but still perceptibly beautiful beneath the interwoven white bindings through which the blood still seeped, colouring them faintly here and there, as if they were touched

from without by strange, red-tipped, invisible fingers.

The man bit his lip, and bent nearer, pity in every line of his form.

"Now for those fingers," he said.

He raised the woman's right hand with infinite tenderness, the blood spurting in intermittent jets over his own as he did so. With a gasp of sickening horror, Gwen perceived that the third and fourth fingers had been rudely hacked off at the middle joint.

"If we only had instruments," he cried in the sudden impatience of mental pain.

"Here you are, sir," said Montana, producing a razor from her pocket. "I coaxed it from a barber this morning. Knew we'd need a dozen."

The man gave a sigh of relief.

"Good," he exclaimed.

Gwen watched them as they worked together, too intent to note her presence, cutting the bones of the fingers, shaping and lapping the flesh into place, binding and sterilising as they worked, using a solution of the carbolic acid and the water that she had brought down from the hill.

They had hardly completed the operation when the figure on the bed turned and moaned faintly, responding to a second fortified dose of nitro-glycerine. She opened her eyes, but there was no intelligence in them as she looked straight up into the man's face bending above her.

"Don't you know me, Frances?" he asked, putting a tender hand for a second on the bruised head.

Her lips opened as she stared up at him vacantly, but no word escaped her.

The man uttered a pained exclamation.

"Frances, don't you know me?" he urged, looking intently into the half-closed eyes, striving to force her back into a knowledge of the present.

Her lips parted with a faint moan.

"He cut them off with a hatchet," babbled the maimed figure, her mind harking back to her last vivid horror, "he cut them off with a hatchet."

The man gave a smothered cry and covered his face with his hands; the nurse turned away unable to bear all the words called up.

The voice trailed on: "He cut them off

with a hatchet—a hatchet. He cut them off with a hatchet."

They were all petrified into silence while the fearful reiteration continued.

"My God," cried the man. "This is unendurable. This must stop." Then in a low voice. "We must learn where her husband is before it is too late."

He put his finger over her pulse and shook his head. Then again his hand rested with hovering tenderness upon the woman's head.

"Frances," he said with gentle urgency, "where is he—the General?"

For a moment the murmuring lips grew silent. He leaned nearer. A faint gleam of intelligence crossed the woman's face.

"Where is the General?" he asked again, speaking impressively and distinctly.

Her mouth opened slightly, revealing a gleam of even, white teeth. He inclined his head that he might more clearly hear the expected words.

"He cut them off with a hatchet," she murmured.

"This is unbearable," cried the man, rising to his feet.

He took a step or two into the open, stretching out his arms wide in a sort of appeal.

Gwen and the nurse lingered, their eyes on the dying woman, filled with pity, but helpless.

In a moment the man returned and knelt beside the couch. He was making a last effort. He concentrated his will, looking deep into the meaningless eyes over which the lids drooped, the blue iris only half disclosed.

"Grafton General Memsahib," he said slowly, but very distinctly, as if in announcement.

The woman's voice grew silent. Her head ceased to move.

"Grafton General Memsahib," he repeated.

The dazed mind, jolted back from present conditions into old and accustomed grooves, hovered for a moment on the verge of consciousness. Then her lids slowly lifted.

Her eyes, freed from the film of delirium, looked straight in the man's bending over her. Wonder grew in her face—wonder

and a trace of fear. The unwounded hand groped over the blanket.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Here, Frances, among friends," he answered.

The fear in her face deepened.

"Am I—dead?" she whispered.

"Why, you know me, Frances," he said. "It's Keith."

"Keith!" she echoed, the terror concentrating. "Keith!" Her voice rising in a sort of shriek. "Not Keith!"

"Yes, and your friend always," he said, striving to soothe her.

"Oh! not you," she went on. "Not you! it is too much."

He bit his lips, feeling powerless to quiet her increasing distress.

"Are you happy?" she asked faintly, her eyes fixed on him.

"Yes, quite happy."

"Oh! I have dreamed of you always. It has been my punishment; and now this!"

She struggled to raise herself in a sort of panic.

"Don't, dear, don't," he beseeched. "Lie still. We all wish you well. Think of the

children, and tell me where I can find the General. Just a word or two will do. Where is the General?"

"At Peshawer," she answered, still watching him as if fascinated. "Am I going to live?"

"Yes," he answered, lying, as people do to the dying.

She was not to be deceived.

"No, I am dying," she said. "Can't you see how horrible it is? I am dying and"—her voice rose in a wail—"it was those very rings. Forgive me! Forgive me."

"Forget it, Frances," he cried in desperation, "forget it! I have. There is nothing to forgive."

But her mind had travelled round again to the groove he dreaded. The intelligence faded from her face.

"He cut them off——" she babbled feebly.

The man would hear no more. He rose and stumbled blindly from the tent.

## CHAPTER X

### AN AWAKENING

DEATH! It was coming. Gwen recognised the approach of the arch foe as she crouched in terror in a corner of the tiny tent, listening for the first time to the sound of the death rattle. She shrank and shuddered without power to move. Little Montana was too busy to notice her presence, and it was not until she had closed the dead woman's eyes, and composed her limbs, that she turned and saw Gwen's shrinking figure.

"You here," she said in a low voice. "It is a pity. There was no need." She stopped in reflection. "We must put her out of sight—soon."

"Without a prayer," cried Gwendolyn, sobbing.

Little Montana's face softened.

"One can pray on one's feet in times like these. You may stay here with her," looking at the figure on the bed. "It may help you both."

She went out, letting the tent flap drop behind her.

To approach the dead woman took all Gwen's moral and mental strength. She knelt and stretched out her hands. She was all unused to prayer, except her own girlish petitions breathed thoughtlessly betwixt consciousness and sleep, with a dozen memories dancing in her brain to drive out more intimate communion. Now her words went up from her heart in a cry of compassionate yearning.

"O Lord be merciful to her a sinner. O Lord! be merciful."

When Dr. Travers and the nurse returned they found her kneeling with her face buried in her hands. The doctor paused and looked at her, inexpressibly shocked. She appeared like the figure of the Magdalen, with her unbound hair falling about her.

"Poor child!" he muttered. "Poor child!"

Then his eyes strayed to the battered form stretched on the couch. He stood for an instant, Montana behind, awaiting orders. A mist came over his vision as he looked. He passed the girl and bowed himself for a moment beside the dead. His petition was a silent humble one. He doubted his own right to prayer. Then he bent forward and kissed the cold forehead just above the eyes.

"For auld lang syne," he whispered.

"Now, dear, you had better go," said Little Montana.

Gwen looked up at her, chilled by her words. She realised what underlay them. She knew that the hasty disposal of the dead must follow the tragedies of these days. Delay was but a threat to the living, and left the horrors to accumulate about them; but it was so dreadful! She could not justify it to herself at that moment. The woman was one of her own world, and had moved, scarcely twenty-four hours before, carelessly, happily, it was probable, among her own friends. Gwen was still shuddering from the thought of her aunt and the memory of the leap of flames above

her funeral bier. She felt she could endure no more. She rose and went out among the tent dwellers. She could not witness the next scene in this horrid drama.

In sudden sharp contrast appeared the busy life on the hillside. There these suddenly homeless people moved, arranging new quarters with a stoic philosophy that was almost unbelievable. Some few wore shocked, grey faces; but for the most part they were merry, full of a strange, unreasoning hopefulness.

"Save anything, Mac?" called one man to another.

"What I've got on," said Mac with a grin.

"Same here," cried the first man, giving his companion a sounding slap on the shoulder, and then they both laughed apparently without cause, but sharing vaguely in some prank of fortune which they enjoyed in common.

A camp of half a dozen men had taken up quarters under a stretched canvas roof without sides, and the jokes came thick and fast as they moved, busily getting their new household into shape. "Zindkand's Cafe"

were the words scrawled rudely above their shelter.

"How many courses to-night, chef?" asked one man of another, who wore a paper cap upon his head in imitation of a French cook.

"I tink," said the cook, in exorable imitation of the French accent, "I tink ten."

He held up ten fingers.

"Ha! Ha!" roared the chorus. "What will you give us?"

"First beans, und second beans," he tallied on his fingers, "und den beans."

"Shut up, you old cuckoo clock," one of the group called out, and the laughter rang.

By some means one quaint old lady had managed to get a square piano dragged up on the hillside, and she was hurrying about busily arranging a meal. She had iron grey hair over which she wore a black lace cap. Her costume of shining alpaca was speckless. She had the intent, intimate appearance of a spinster pursuing accustomed duties at her own fireside.

An Irish woman, with a broad, good-natured face, stopped in her ministration to her baby, which in usual times are re-

served for the secret privacy of the family circle, to watch the little woman's prim, canary-like preparations.

"Phat's up?" she queried. "Yez got more toime than money this day, Oi'm afther thinkin', Miss Jordan."

"Time! Mrs. Flynn, time!" said the little woman in the black cap, stopping her preparations. "I've got a good half dozen lessons to give to-day and in the best families. Such people are exacting, and I'm not complaining. They have a right to be. They ask the best and I give the best, but how I'm going to have the time to get them in is what I don't see."

Mrs. Flynn put down the baby, and rushed off to share her joke with half a dozen cronies.

"Will yez listen, my dearies, will yez listen? Miss Jordan is afther givin' lessons this blissed day! Oh! Whirra! Whirra! Will yez hear that? This blissed day!"

Miss Jordan's cap-strings trembled with indignation as she turned to meet Gwen's compassionate eyes.

"What can one expect of the vulgar," she said with qaint dignity. "Unfortunate-

ly, though, my instructors were of the best, and my clientéle still most distingué, I feel compelled, because of close competition, to demand but a slight remuneration for my services, and it obliges me to arrange my domestic affairs in a way that brings me in contact with these—undesirable people, especially in times like these."

"I fear, Miss Jordan," said Gwen, gently, "that perhaps you don't quite realise how disorganised conditions are just now. I don't think your pupils will expect you."

"Not expect me," said Miss Jordan, blankly. She sat on the grass, careless of her speckless alpaca, from sheer amazement. "I haven't missed a lesson, with the exception of holidays and Sabbaths, for twenty-five years."

Gwen sat down beside her.

"Affairs will arrange themselves," she said soothingly. "But just now you're safer and better staying here."

Miss Jordan winked, striving to digest this new phase. Earthquakes were disconcerting, conflagrations excessively inconvenient, but to deliberately neglect her

pupils! Only then did life seem wholly upheaved.

A strident voice asserted itself above the busy rustle of the hillside.

"Come on, fellows," called out one of the men from "Zindkand's Cafe." "Let us see the fun," and they scampered up the hillside.

The "fun" was a brawny, red-armed woman, her grey hair streaming in waspish wisps, her sturdy figure set. She was clad in a black and white mother-hubbard, confined at the waist by an apron of dubious cleanliness. She was indulging in a fluent speech, punctuated by many gestures and occasional oaths.

"It's the judgment of the Lord," she cried. "It's the judgment of the Lord! We're all down now. We're all on a level, and it's about time. Now what can they do, these fine ladies covered all over with stones from the devil's workshop? Now we will see what they can do, these fine ladies and gentlemen, mincing and prinking along as if they were Mr. and Mrs. Jehovah. I haven't had time for such actions or running about nights, and forgetting the

duties of an honest woman. No! I've got a clear conscience and I'm proud of it. I turned up my sleeves forty years ago and I ain't had time to turn them down again since. That's what it is to be an honest woman and a good wife. Let's see what these Mr. and Mrs. Jehovahs will do, now that they are down with the rest of us. Let us see what they will do now the judgment of the Lord is turned against them and their vanities and their puffings up. And the women are the worst," she cried, with a sudden burst of fury that turned her red face purple. "The women are always the worst."

"Go it, old girl," cried the man with the paper cap, and there was a round of ironic applause.

"Oi could well believe it, seein' yez," said Mrs. Flynn, drily.

"Ye Jezebel!" yelled the oratress.

"Ye blasphemous old windbag," cried Mrs. Flynn. Then a peace-spreading neighbour interfered and bore Mrs. Flynn away, and the old harridan gradually grew silent from lack of an audience.

Too much real tragedy lay about them

for more than a short diversion from their own cares and needs.

Gwen sat down upon the grass watching the relentless spread of flames within the city. The power of emotion seemed to have died within her. She watched, and waited, and watched. Would the fire never cease? The news of its actual progress filtered slowly into this ring of foot hills bounding the mission districts. It was more cut off than most portions of the city from centers of information. To the people taking shelter here, help came slowly. Medical supplies and food reached them days later than it did other portions of the town. It was not until the next morning that the regular soldiers or volunteers under the city government, patrolled these hills.

And it was against these odds that Travers and Little Montana were fighting, with a scant supply of stimulants, insufficient means for sterilising, and little more than two razors, which soon grew dull, and a small saw, lent them by a kind-hearted butcher, for their surgical work. But they went their way undaunted, their chief aid coming from Montana's cache of the early

morning, on which they drew with caution, fearing it might become exhausted.

Gwen, sitting there, beheld a new Travers. A man with a worn, handsome face, but full of purpose and the winning charm of self-forgetting. She heard his low considerate tone to women whose troubled faces brightened as he passed; she saw his tender touch upon the head of children; she noticed the patience with which he passed over difficulties, and the steadfastness of his outward, upward look. She watched him until with a sudden sense of self-conviction that horrified her, she realised that her thoughts were concentrated on this man while the vision of Chester was waxing dim in her mind.

She gave a little gasp as the thought fell across her consciousness like a blow.

Travers had just emerged from one of the tents, and stood for a moment in the open. His eyes turned to her for an instant, then over towards the burning city. It was one of the few pauses he had allowed himself, and although he looked worn, there was a serenity in his face that stood like a chasm between this Travers,

and the Travers of that hideous dawn, which, though in reality it was but a few hours, seemed such a long time ago.

Gwen saw it; felt it. He was no longer a stranger to be feared, but a tower of strength toward which to turn. To her inexpressible dismay, she found within herself the same feeling she read on the face of these hill folk, as they looked toward him; a sense of trusting and dependence. Then, with a sudden rush of inexpressible dismay, she read in her heart a something more, the consciousness of the charm he exercised over her, that was thrusting Chester into the background. Chester! of whom she had thought the night before with a sense of self-surrender.

She put her hands before her eyes to shut out the sight of Travers. Was she so fickle, so unworthy that she was incapable of sustaining a sentiment of simple loyalty toward the man she had promised to marry? But, her heart whispered while the dull red crept in between her binding fingers, might it not be that her love for Chester was but a girlish fancy—a mistake. Might it not be that this strange convulsion of circum-

stance aroused her to facts to which she would have awakened later amid disillusions, and with an aching heart. If that were so, still she despised herself. How could she have blundered so, have planned to brave her aunt's displeasure, but to find upon the morrow she had staked so much upon so slight a thing?

She would think no more, she resolved; and then again before she was aware of it, her mind was madly hammering upon the very notes that she had vowed she would not strike. Might it not be, her thoughts went on, that people sometimes read their hearts aright only below the illuminating touch of a real love. Hers leapt as she pressed her lips close. But Travers! The burglar of that morning!

Her heart took up the argument: he was not all bad. The moment she had seen him a stranger, that had struck her, and now to-day she saw him all patience and gentleness. Behind him stretched a life filled all too probably, with sin and a tragedy. Who was she to judge him?

The lines of Browning crept into her mind:

"With his flowers to praise
Or his weeds to blame
And either or both to love."

"I won't listen," she said to herself. "It is the earthquake. These strange conditions have bewitched me."

"He is a criminal," said cold Judgment, sternly taking up the argument.

Her hands dropped to her knees and rested there. She threw back her head in sheer weariness of her conflicting emotions.

"I won't struggle," she thought. "I'll just live on and drift. I'm only an atom, a useless atom. Nature has been telling me that all day, and instead of feeling my littleness, I'm sitting here, shut up within myself, close within myself, fighting bloodless battles with phantoms, while all about is pain—real pain and death."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MONEY AND THE MAN

At about twelve o'clock on the morning of the earthquake a girl was seen walking down Van Ness Avenue. She went a few steps, and then loitered, biting her lips as if she fought an impulse. She was a tall, dark girl with a full, red mouth and a spirited air. Her ruffled hair, hastily arranged amidst a great excitement, curled rebelliously from beneath a jaunty hat whose red rose set off the russet glow of her cheek.

Her brown shoes were scuffed from long, hard toiling, and her face was spotted with soot. She was clad in a dark blue, side-pleated skirt, and a black jacket.

As she paused, she glanced at the roll of smoke above the city, smiled mockingly, and then, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders, resumed her walk.

"What's the use," she said aloud to herhelf more than once as she went.

She stopped before a tall apartment house, glanced up over its façade with its granite facings, her two hands sunk deep in her pockets, and pondered.

"Guess I'd better let the whole business slide," she muttered. "As for him! Bah!"

Then, as she looked, a sight caught her eye, a strange one on that morning, filled to the brim with fear, or flight, or energy. At one of the front windows on the second floor she saw a hand, only a hand, but at the sight of it her eyes narrowed in eager scrutiny. Then she laughed in a sort of self-mocking derision.

"Well, that beats—even him. Who would have thought it."

The hand passed to and fro before the window—hovered, hesitated, then moved on again. It was a strong, masculine hand, and the mind directing it was for the time intent and interested, oblivious of the world without and the widening panoply of the horror-laden smoke above the city.

For some moments the girl stood regarding it, chuckling to herself the while, a

chuckle in which contempt was largely mingled. Then she turned and walked up the granite steps of the apartment house.

The door was unguarded. The coloured boy usually stationed there had deserted in the universal disorganisation. The entrance was luxurious in softly tinted marbles, and richly wrought brass lamps. The elevator was stationary between the floors some flights above. Nobody was in sight. The girl knew her way. She went up the stairs with hardy resolution, never stopping until she paused before a door of one of the front compartments. For a moment she stood there, listening, before she flung it open with an air of bravado.

It was a beautiful room into which she stepped. Its furnishing had been directed by an individuality which felt for the soft spots of the earth. There were deeply cushioned chairs, many pillows on the divans, shaded lamps, mellow-hued rugs, and a broad fire-place. It was a room in which a spoiled, sleek house-cat would have curled up with a sense that it had reached cat-heaven.

Before the windows a man bent over a

table, his handsome head and brawny throat standing clear and fine against the yellow sheen of the draperies. He was playing a game of solitaire!

The girl stepped swiftly within the room, closed the door, and placed her back against it. The man looked up with a start, a card poised in his hand, his eyes darting interrogation and wrath.

"What the devil brought you here?" he queried, angrily.

The girl clasped her hands behind her back and laughed.

"Well, let's call it the devil, Chester Drexel."

"Damn you!" cried Drexel, rising with angry haste, and half upsetting the card table as he did so. "You promised me only yesterday that we were quits, and it was off."

"Be careful, Mr. Drexel," said the girl, ironically, advancing a step or two into the room, "or, just think, you may never know whether you beat yourself at that game or not. As for yesterday—it was yesterday. Lots has happened since."

"But for you to turn up in this fashion!

Somebody might have seen you," and Drexel opened the door and peered down the passage anxiously.

The girl threw herself into the chair before the fire, removing her hat and tossing it lightly to one side.

"Oh! don't worry," she said, leaning back and speaking with a provoking drawl. "The world really isn't watching you this morning. For once it's minding its own business, and it's having plenty to do. Not playing solitaire, either."

Chester gave a shamefaced glance at the cards on the table near the window before he came and stood before the carved mantelpiece, leaning against it with his usual unvarying grace. The assurance that the world did not have its eyes upon him made this intrusion upon his solitude something of a relief.

"A fellow must employ himself some way these times," he said. "It's the very deuce if you let yourself think."

"Indeed," she said. "And you could find nothing to do out there."

She nodded toward the window.

"Out there," he cried, with a shiver of

repulsion. "I was out this morning, and what do you think they made me do? They put me to burying—horses!"

She looked at him gravely for an instant.

"If you'd been where I've been, they'd have put you to burying—something else."

"Don't talk of it," he cried, a sort of feminine panic in his manner. "I can't—I won't endure it! I won't hear of it!"

He began to walk the floor excitedly.

The girl leaned forward, gazing meditatively into the encindered grate, with her chin in her hands.

"Yet he calls himself a man," she said, self-communingly. "He looks like a man, a great, handsome giant of a man. God!" She suddenly buried her face in her hands.

Chester had come to a halt before the window, and she flashed around at him, rising to her feet in a wrath that made her beautiful.

"Who made you," she cried, "you handsome devil, to bewitch such women as I—I?" She struck her breast in sudden fury. You beautiful, saw-dust doll with a rotten heart; and I, what am I? God knows! But this I do know. I've seen men to-day fight-

ing like demons in those flames there. And women—women who could be silent—yes, silent, with the world going to pieces under their feet. I've seen such sights as I could never have believed in. Unselfishness! Heroism! They're not only words in the dictionary! They're living, breathing facts. They're true. And I left them, turned my back on them, and came here to you, you nothing but beautiful skin and badness. Nothing, nothing!"

She walked to and fro, pushing the furniture heedlessly to right and left to clear a path for herself. There was something fierce in her stride as she went. Drexel watched her without speaking. He had seen her in many moods and had learned the wisdom of silence.

"And yet I came," she went on. "Look at me." She flung her arms down at her sides in token of defeat. "Your work and you know it! And yet I am back again." She beat her hands suddenly to her temples. "See here, Chester Drexel. If I am what I am, for once I'll tell you what a poor, mean shrimp-souled creature you are. Actually," she laughed bitterly, "I came

here despite myself, to see if you were safe. I feared, as well as I knew you, that you might be down among the fire workers, and injured. What a joke! What a splendid joke!"

"See here, Erma. You're going a little too far," cried Drexel, hoarse with passion. "I won't endure this from anyone." She turned, and with a swift gesture pointed toward the table where the cards lay.

"Won't you," she said, with derisively raised eyebrows.

Shamed, he hesitated, but only for an instant. Then his lips loosed, and his brow lowered in a brutal rage.

"No, I won't," he stammered, "I won't take such talk from anybody—but much less from you;" ending with a sneer.

She had resumed her position in the chair, and she now leaned forward, looking up at him immovable as a statue, her full, red lips a little drooped at the corners, but not in despondency, her ruffled hair astray on her cheeks.

"Yes, you have a right to sneer," she said slowly, speaking more to herself than to him, "but not for the past. It is for the

present. Why am I here? Why didn't I leave you to make your own way out of it? I could start life afresh somewhere else. I know the power of a handsome woman, and I have the brains. You haven't even brains."

He made a threatening movement as if he would strike her, but she smiled calmly back in his face.

"Oh! No, you won't strike me," she said. "I despise you too much. You simply couldn't."

As she smiled, the power went out of him, but not the rage.

"And now I know you for just what you are, and yet," she shrugged her shoulders, "I'm here."

"Damn you!" he burst out.

"Do you know what I've been watching all this morning?" she went on, unmoved. "I've just gone from spot to spot, and seen Miss Thornton's buildings burn."

He gave a start.

"But they're insured," he gasped, with greed uppermost.

She leaned back in the great chair, threw one leg over the other, clasped her hands

behind her head, and waited a delicious moment before she said:

"Not one!"

Drexel reeled backward, and sat down weakly.

This was the worst blow the morning had brought him.

"You're lying," he said, but without conviction.

"Mrs. Addington was a fool," said Erma. "She didn't have the business instincts of a flea. She carried her own insurance. Then when the money accumulated she put in into some more property. She was real estate mad!"

Drexel turned and walked the floor.

"She bought and bought on the rise—and mortgaged and mortgaged."

"Great Scott!" cried Drexel.

"I thought that would get you," said Erma, complacently. "I wasn't her stenographer for nothing. Miss Thornton hasn't a clear piece of land in San Francisco."

"Then practically it is swept clean away," muttered Drexel.

Erma rose, and wandered lightly about

the room. She peered into a vase, turned over a pillow, readjusted a drapery, but to Drexel she made no reply.

"Is she penniless?" he gasped at last, tortured by the silence.

Erma came and stood before him.

"Women are queer beasts," she said, musingly. "Now you're not worth the little finger of one of those men down there fighting the fire. You're a giant in strength, and yet I doubt if you'd lift your hulk to save a child from drowning. All those inches," she waved her hand up and down to indicate his great height, "hiding in here for fear you'd be asked to soil your white hands."

"I'll strangle that vile tongue in your throat," cried Drexel.

"Oh, no you won't. I've more to tell you—of Miss Thornton's money. After I've told you that, and a few other things, we may talk of strangling. Not yet!"

"Well," said Drexel, impatiently.

Suddenly she put her hands on his shoulders, and a new light dawned in her lustrous, brown eyes.

"I said we women were queer beasts,"

she went on. "I am going to marry you, Chester."

He flung down her hands with an oath, and strode away from her. When he turned, she was still standing in the middle of the room, watching him.

"Damaged goods," she said, bitterly, "marked down; but perhaps you'll find me worth the price."

"You!" he sneered.

"Yes, me," she answered with patience. "You've got to start all over again; you haven't a penny; you have expensive tastes. I," there was an appeal in her voice, "I can look a lady, honestly I can, and I can act a lady when I remember, and I try—and I'll try for your sake, Chester." She extended her hands to him in supplication. "I was a good girl when I met you."

With a snarl he struck her hands aside.

"Shut up that game," he cried.

When again she spoke, her voice was clear and crisp. The best of her she had put aside. There was no more appeal.

"All right. Let's have a new deal. I said I had the brains—and I have them;

but you've got to pay for them, Chester Drexel, and they come high these times. I can give you a fortune, but the price of it is—to marry me."

His face was filled with an amazement that was almost comical. The sight of his expression sent her off into a burst of half-hysterical laughter.

"It's a big dose, but you've got to swallow it, or——" She snapped her fingers in his face, her own filled with unhallowed mirth.

"What's the game," he asked sulkily.

She slipped her hands into the pockets of her jacket, and spoke deliberately.

"The game is just this: Mrs. Addington received only yesterday a large number of payments in gold and currency. Something over ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand," said Drexel, mockingly.

"It isn't much, but it's something," the girl went on imperturbably. "And she has in Government bonds and foreign consols a clean hundred thousand dollars, locked up in the safe on Sutter Street, and I know the combination."

A look of cunning and eagerness grew in Drexel's face.

"But she may have gotten them out before this," he said breathlessly.

"Didn't I tell you I'd been on the scent," she scornfully replied. "The house is burnt to the ground; Miss Thornton has disappeared in the direction of Twin Peaks —hasn't gone near her friends; and the old lady is in Kingdom Come."

"What!" cried Drexel, honestly shocked.

"Bah!" cried Erma. "What of her. Her game was up long ago. She had her day, and made a fuddling mess of her niece's business. Time she did go."

"This is hideous," cried Drexel, the sweat springing out on his forehead.

"Well, hideous or not hideous, she's gone," said Erma coldly. "Let her go. What we're after is the money, isn't it?"

But Drexel was shocked from his selfish oblivion. A horror possessed him. He had seen Mrs. Addington so recently; hers had been an individuality with which he had to reckon; the bend of her grey head as she listened to the General's conversation, was so vivid and fresh a picture in his mind,

that his flesh crept as he thought of Erma's words.

"Great God, woman," he cried in agitation. "Have you no heart."

"Lots—of my own kind," nonchalantly. "Mrs. Addington is—well, she's finished; and why should I be sorry? Why? Tell me that? She stood there like a sentinel guarding that niece of hers; and I—I had to take the scraps that came my way and creep off like a dog when you were done with me. Mrs. Addington! Bah!" She again snapped her fingers, her eyes bright, her cheeks burning, her lips curling cruelly. "It would have been a good thing if that niece of hers had gone up in the flames with her. Putty face!"

"Silence!" demanded Drexel, honestly aroused at last.

The girl took a step toward him, and grasped his wrist savagely.

"Did you love her?" she asked below her breath.

Drexel hesitated.

The girl flung his hand from her with a burst of harsh laughter.

"I'm worth ten of her," she cried trium-

phantly. "Pretty baby! These are fighting days, and what can she do now? Nothing! Look at me." She drew near him. "Am I not worth ten of her? I am alive, man, alive. Feel my hand."

She placed it, burning, upon his, and something of her strange intensity entered into him, vivifying his placid personality.

"Well?" he asked shamefacedly. "What's your design?"

"First," daringly, "to marry you."

He gave a gesture of impatience.

"Yes, that's my price," her voice went on evenly. "I am the only one who knows the word that opens that safe. When you marry me you will have one hundred and ten thousand dollars in your hand, pat. Think of that!"

"You're a devil," he cried, flinging himself away from her, "a devil! I'll have Gwendolyn and the money, too."

"Fool," sneered the girl. "Try it. Try it. Would she marry you now? Have you searched for her? Gone to her? Has a woman no vanity? You, the man who swore you loved her, waiting here, playing—solitaire."

"I'll explain," he stammered.

"And so shall I explain," she cried, aflame with fury. "I'll be silent no longer. I'll explain, Chester Drexel. I know her and her kind. She's cold at heart—cold as a snake. Would she forgive you? Not she! It is only such women as I who forgive and forgive and forgive, and not those pasty saints."

"You"—cried Drexel—"You——" He choked with rage, his face purple and no longer handsome, with his hair damp on his forehead, and his lips working.

She leaned back against the table, both her hands supporting her upon it, her chin lifted tauntingly.

"You will marry me, *and* the money—or you'll marry nobody. Let me tell you that."

She stooped, and picked up her hat, pinning it into place with mocking deliberation, but her eyes warily on him the while.

"You know my address," she said as she walked toward the door. "Let me know when you have the license."

The door closed sharply behind her.

Drexel stood looking stupidly toward it,

too stunned for speech, too uncertain of his course for clear thought. His shoulders stooped, his stalwart frame appeared shaken as from a physical blow.

Suddenly the door opened a few inches.

"The fire is creeping up Sutter Street," said Erma's voice from without. "Don't be too long making up your mind."

## CHAPTER XII

### THE VIGIL

Somebody tapped Gwendolyn upon her shoulder. She turned with a start to face Montana.

"Come," demanded the nurse briefly.

Gwen obeyed without question. Once more they re-entered her tent. The low couch had another occupant now—a mother—and a tiny wail caused Gwen to turn to where a baby lay wrapped in a blanket.

Travers bent over the couch battling for the mother's life, that flickered and flickered, and threatened to expire. His lips were close pressed, the lips of a soldier at battle with the universal foe; but there was infinite tenderness and patience in the man's face as he sought, by the aid of stimulants, to coax back energy into the flagging heart.

Gwen and the nurse were soon occupied with the baby. All the latent motherhood in the girl's nature was stirred by the sight of the tiny creature, born under such untoward circumstances. Now, they washed and dressed it, side by side, Gwen taking infinite comfort in the act, for Little Montana told her with the curtness of a general disposing of her forces, that there would be other babies to dress before the day was over, and she must know how to attend to them.

Gwendolyn did not realise at that moment, that it was the only panacea for sorrow the nurse was offering her—work and helpfulness.

It came by instinct to the girl to turn and lap this strange, soft object in her arms, slipping squirming hands into ill-assorted garments which had been gathered or begged on the hillside.

"Let me alone," wailed the woman from the corner, "take care of the others who care to live."

"Nice speech for the mother of a baby like that," said Little Montana. "Don't like that talk. Do we, Doctor?"

The doctor shook his head, smiling at the woman, whose head moved restlessly from side to side upon her low pillow.

"The little chap will need you, don't forget that. The little chap will need you more than ever," he said.

The sick woman's head ceased to move, and her eyes turned up toward his. For a moment she gazed, and seemed to gather courage there.

"Well, I suppose he does," she said weakly. "I'll try to care." Then she gave a sudden wail of recollection. "Oh! We'd both looked forward to him so."

The doctor laid a hand on her brow and again she grew quieter.

"She's going to try," he said, turning to the nurse, and as if he was speaking of a child.

"Of course she is," responded Montana brightly. "She's no quitter."

Then she explained to Gwendolyn that the woman's husband had been killed that morning.

It was not the only baby by several who first saw the light in that huddled settlement of tents about the foot of Twin Peaks.

Neither Travers, the nurse, nor Gwen had much time for thought. The work would have been hard at best, and they were handicapped by insufficient facilities. They were back to first principles.

Gwen followed, humbly striving to do her best, feeling an indelible shame at the clumsiness of her efforts, at her inability to forestall the doctor's needs as Little Montana did.

The day passed without their noting the flight of the hours.

Gwen and Travers sat down side by side for their evening meal. They were fellow-soldiers, and thought of false distinctions had faded completely out of sight some time ago.

Little Montana had accepted the urgent invitation of the men of "Zindkand's Cafe" to share their dinner with them. She had won a reverent admiration from this strange motley of characters who had all day watched her indomitable efforts in growing amazement.

"I say," said one, "but she's the real thing."

"That's what," commented another.

"Grit, clean through. Little thing like that, too."

"Let's give her a feed," said the chef. "Compliments of the Zindkand's Cafe, and a thank-you all round. She dressed Jim's arm good as new, and it was blistered to the shoulder. It made me sick to look at it. She sick? Not she! She didn't have time to get sick. 'Up and at it again,' sez she."

"I guess I'd better go, Doctor," Montana had said, as Gwen urged her to their evening repast. "They'd kind of feel it if I didn't. You'd be surprised how thin-skinned men like that can be. They're good fellows, every one of them."

"Aren't you coming, nurse?" urged the chef from the distance, with more energy than manners, as he lifted a steaming pot from the fire.

"Sure thing," said Little Montana, and she paused to say hastily with a nod toward the tent: "Think we'll pull her through?"

Travers smiled reassuringly as he answered: "I believe we shall; and that we shall make a go of the condensed milk for the baby whose mother has died."

Montana's face brightened.

"Fine and dandy!" she cried, as she hurried down to join the group below.

Gwen and Travers sat watching the unabated glow in the heavens. They could clearly trace the ravages of the growing fire. The city lay before them like a creature in pain, the thunder of the dynamite reaching them distinctly at intervals. It thundered endlessly—endlessly.

Gwen was unaccustomed to such physical exertion as had fallen to her lot that day, and though she was too weary for connected thought, the sense of her grief and the horror of the morning hovered over her like phantoms as she watched the burning city, the fire glow shining on her young face, on the dark eyes, and on the drooping mouth, not accustomed to such unmirthful curves.

Travers spoke at last, a sort of awkward shyness taking possession of him. Each moment of that day had hitherto been too overflowing with action for any sense of the personal to enter in.

"I am awfully sorry that you are not to have your tent after all," he said.

She looked up with the aloofness of grief. It seemed such an infinitely small matter to her.

"I'm only too glad she has it," she said. "I shall be all right."

He lingered, still watching her, and noting the tragic touch the fire lent to her beauty.

"There are two pairs of blankets," he said, "and I've made a pillow of my coat. Won't you lie down and rest? You need it sadly."

"Rest," she cried in sudden despair. "How can I rest with that over there."

She pointed to the sweep of the flames.

His face grew soft, watching her.

"But you're needed, you see," he said. "If you don't try to keep up your strength, you'll just be in the other camp. Won't you rest?"

This argument went home. She struggled with herself a moment, the yellow glint of the dancing fire in her eyes.

"Well, I'll try."

It did not even occur to her to feel any fear of him or of those about her. After a moment's hesitation, she crept into the

blankets he had pointed out to her, and nestled down in them.

He watched sentinel-like, several yards away, a straight soldierly figure, and as he watched, a peace stole into his heart such as it had not known for he dared not think how long.

The little weary figure on the ground had committed herself to him without question, and knowing that, the sense of his manhood arose within him. Self-respect reasserted itself. He felt happy, actually happy, with a city burning beneath his eyes, and all about him the evidences of panic, flight and poverty.

One by one, the camp fires died down, but still the hill-dwellers prowled about, casting uneasy glances at the glare below, moving, moving like uneasy spirits. Now a figure stood out black against the sky, then again they stood in groups, dissolving, changing, but ever-watching.

He advanced cautiously a few paces nearer to Gwendolyn. He was almost sure she slept the sleep of physical and emotional exhaustion. One more pace and he could hear the quiet come and go of her breath.

Occasionally it caught in a quick sigh, the unequal respiration telling of the heavy heart within, where even in sleep the grief was not completely forgotten. He sat down and gazed at her. A strange vigil; he, the burglar who had entered her house, by force and stealth, not twenty-four hours earlier; she, the spoiled child of fortune, lying on the earth, beneath a borrowed shelter, amid a medley of the city's humblest folk, slumbered on beneath his guardianship.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A CRISIS

Gwen slept, but occasionally her eyelids quivered and her limbs twitched from the strain of overwrought nerves and overused muscles, and her mind was troubled by dreams.

Now her aunt was speaking as she had spoken the night before, standing with her opera-cloak slipping from her shoulders, but her face was pervaded by a sadness which Gwen was vainly seeking to dispel.

"Why are you so sad, Auntie?" she whispered. "Why are you sad?"

Again she was dressing babies—babies with strange, old, lined faces, and feeble, groping hands.

"I didn't know there were so many babies in the world," she thought.

Then she was in her tent on the hill-

side, with the woman with the crushed head; and everywhere was blood. The woman was dead, she knew, because she lay so horribly quiet. What was the matter with her hand? God! It was mangled! How hideously mangled. Suddenly the dead woman unclosed her glassy eyes, and raising her bloody hand, pointed squarely at Gwendolyn.

"Give me back my rings," she muttered between her cold, blue lips. "Give me back my rings."

Gwendolyn screamed.

"Stop looking at me," she cried. "I have done you no wrong."

But the atmosphere about the woman vibrated with a thousand voices shouting: "Her rings—give her back her rings!" The air was clamorous with them.

Gwen sat up amid her blankets, trembling and gasping, her heart beating tumultuously. It was only a dream! No! It was reality! Now that her eyes were open, the voices rang on, louder and louder, shout rising above shout!

The fire in the city below danced on unappeased. She could distinguish the

tongues of the flames stenciling themselves against the black reek of the smoke, writhing, twisting like snakes. Now and again the fall of a wall or the collapse of a roof sent up a floating colony of brilliant sparks, to lose themselves in the darkness, that after all was but half darkness, for the world was sickeningly bright from the conflagration. Its light shone, shading from dull red to yellow, upon her tent, within which the sick woman moaned restlessly.

But the air was full of the ring of voices.

Without warning the terror of the night seized full upon Gwendolyn; the indefinable fears that were afloat all about her like a miasma, descended and took possession of her. She was alone. The entire hillside seemed deserted. Amid the come and go of the night, deepening but never entirely darkening, she could distinguish no living being near her. The tent village was deserted save for the colony of dogs who were tied to rude tent pegs. These dogs moved uneasily alert, the fire gleaming in their eyes, whimpering out their fear.

Still the clamour that had awakened her, continued. It vibrated through the hills,

and gradually the impression grew in Gwēn's mind that it bore a note of joy rather than of alarm or despair. It was cheering! mad, lusty cheering! Around it circled, carried like a breeze from group to group of the folk crowding down the hillside and into the recently deserted city in a mass.

There were waving arms, tossing hats, and a pandemonium of clamour.

Gwen could not guess its cause. She perceived in a hazy way that the fire had eaten nearer her retreat, for her weary mind was slow to grasp impressions. A woman's voice floated up to her with a sob in it.

"They've turned back the fire at Twentieth Street," the voice said. "Our home won't go after all, John."

It was then that Gwen realised that they had checked the progress of the conflagration in the direction of Twin Peaks.

"Thank God!" Gwen breathed with mechanical lips, striving to rejoice with the people, but her flagging spirits refused to respond. The inevitable reaction born of grief, nerve shocks, and severe physical

strain had taken hold of her. She felt chilled and her bones ached. Her couch upon the earth had grown harder with each succeeding hour, but that was discomfort of the body only. The floating fear-demons, bred in thousands of terror-stricken hearts, clutched upon hers.

The whimpering dogs frightened her; the glare of the fire appalled her; the hillside, with its litter of deserted tents, filled her with dread unspeakable. These indications of man's presence represented no companionship, but, as they stood for humanity, were a menace. For it was humanity she dreaded, the prowling midnight looter and worse. The vague enveloping fear of the night arose into sudden frenzy!

She unrolled herself from her blankets with palpitating haste. The instinct of retreat gripped her. She must flee away.

She was distraught, without distinct purpose, possessed of a demon of insensate panic, the child of her long day of horror and exhaustion. She rose and paused, in a flutter, for chance to direct her way. She saw the silhouette of Travers' form, tall and black, against the fire glow. She knew

he was watching her—had been watching her. This sinister figure became the focus of all her fears. It had been mingled with the first, pale hours of the morning when he had stood within her room, an incarnation of lawlessness. He was a burglar, and she was there in the night alone with him and the smitten, labouring city below.

On a sudden the most terrible feeling in the world, the fear of a woman for a man closed over her. With a smothered cry she sped away.

In and out among the tents she went. She stumbled over a tent rope; again she lunged into a jangling collection of household utensils; now she barely escaped the snapping jaws of a hound slinking in the shadow. But for her there was no fear but the one she felt following close behind her, intent, threatening, unescapable.

"Miss Thornton," a voice called out appealingly.

The sound of that voice but lent wings to her feet. On she sped! A long, black hollow of the hills sloped down before her. Into it she darted, her pace quickening on the unimpeded sward. A lamp hung dang-

ling from a telegraph pole a hundred feet below. Toward it she bent her flight, the instinctive longing for a light underlying her unreasoning movement.

"Oh! Miss Thornton," called out the voice again, raised to a higher pitch by strenuous command. "Not there, I beg of you."

This but confirmed her in her unformed opposition, in her fight against the enemy behind her. As straight as an arrow from a bow, as instinctively as a moth to a flame, she directed her way toward that pole and the dangling lantern. Behind her she could hear her pursuer pant and exclaim in low, pained expostulation.

Below the pole she paused petrified, her eyes strained upward and glaring, her jaw dropped.

The soft light of the lantern flooded a swinging, black figure. The head drooped over the breast, twisted all awry. A hat was mercifully pulled down over the empurpled face. A rope, sickeningly taut, stretched from the wryed neck to the crossbars of the telegraph pole above. A slight breeze stirred the form, and it swung gent-

ly, the black shadow below it floating with it over the short grass. It was so still; so hideously silent.

No need to read the word scrawled rudely on the placard over the collapsed chest. Gwen knew! There stood her fear and its consequences embodied, there were represented violence, outrage, and sudden death. It was the vengeance of an unprotected people, who safeguarded themselves and the honour of their women, by this summary justice.

With a helpless cry she reeled and fell, trembling and powerless to drag herself away from the awful thing that swayed above, its shadow floating over her, and now gently withdrawing, as if in salutation.

She felt Traver's breath come in gasps, and his hand shake as he strove to raise her.

"Have mercy!" she whispered feebly. "Have mercy!"

She shrank from him, sobbing, digging her fingers into the cold ground, her cheeks swept by the short, up-starting grass.

"My God!" he cried, "and I have forfeited the right to reassure her."

For a moment he stood there before he bent over her once more.

"I believe," he said hoarsely, "I believe if you fear me, I'll go mad!"

He raised her trembling to her feet, and half carried her back to the tent.

The camp-fire was dying down. She sat huddled on the blankets she had just deserted, as he piled it high with shingles and broken boxes that he had gathered that day in his usual far-sighted way. His face looked strange in the flickering light.

He came and handed her a draught in a cup.

"Drink it," he said. "It will help you. You are in sad need of it."

"No, no," she whispered, rocking herself to and fro, like her squaw-sisters, frightened back into the primitive. "No, no."

"You must," he urged, with gentle insistence, "or you'll be ill."

She obeyed him, mechanically, her teeth chattering on the edge of the tin cup as she did so.

"And now won't you lie down?" he said beseechingly. "You need the warmth, and the medicine will take effect the sooner."

"No, no," she protested with stiff lips; and so he wrapped a pair of blankets about her shoulders as she still sat staring at the fire.

He retired to the other side of it, and all was silence, save for the crackling of the flames, the whining of the dogs and the ominous boom of the dynamite from the burning city.

At last Gwen spoke.

"Why did you keep me here?" she demanded.

"Because I thought the city was doomed," he answered.

"But my friends' houses are still there. You can see them against the glare," she insisted.

He twisted one hand over the other. This inquisition was agony to him.

"I honestly thought I did best—at first," he said, as if the words were forced from him.

"At first," she echoed fiercely. "And later! What about then?"

"Those houses will probably go yet," he went on. "There are the scattered cinders, the individual fires started here and there

within the city. I cannot believe but that it will all go."

She bent forward, fiercely questioning.

"If it does go could I be worse off than I am here? I'd be under the same sky, out in the same night, and I'd be among friends, cared for and protected. Not here! not here!"

She saw her words entered into his soul like dagger thrusts, but she felt no pity.

"You are protected," he said, his voice low, his head bent forward until she could only see the light glinting on his wavy hair.

"Protected!" she laughed feebly. "Protected!"

At that laugh he threw back his head and looked at her as a tortured man might look at his executioner.

But she gave no heed, again rocking herself to and fro in silence. When she became in a degree composed and looked up, she saw that Travers had changed his position. His hands were clasped over his face and she perceived the tears steal slowly between the close-pressed fingers. It reminded her of the way that the blood had seeped out through the wrapped bandages

of the woman's head that morning. She knew he, too, was bleeding from within, though he struggled to suppress his grief with all the might of his will.

She watched in amazement. The bromide he had given her was beginning to tune her jarred nerves to a point nearer the natural. She grew more normal and saw clearer as she watched.

The woman in her read one thing distinctly. It was a soul crisis that she was witnessing, and gradually a faith in the tortured man began to blossom within her heart. She stole around and sat down by his side. Life had been crowding in upon her rapidly during this endless day. She had developed years within its hours. She had reached the mellowness of womanhood, in whose train came human comprehension and with it its sister-in-love—sympathy. Here was a life and soul committed to her care, to her so unprepared and inexperienced. She lifted her eyes and her lips moved.

"Lead me, Father," she whispered. "Of myself how can I know? I am so unused, so ignorant!"

For some moments she sat there before he became aware of her presence. Gradually it dawned upon his consciousness that an influence sweet as an aroma was near, and he looked up and saw her. The firelight played softly over her lovely profile, upon the sunny curls upon her brow, and revealed the gentleness as of an angel, that dwelt upon her face.

He could scarcely believe in her presence. His wondering fingers felt for the rough hem of her overcoat to assure himself that he saw aright.

For a few moments they were both silent.

Then she spoke:

"You have had a bitter struggle and hard blows, I know. But would it not be better to tell me. I feel it would unburden your heart and make the new start easier."

"The new start?" he questioned ironically.

"Yes," she answered.

"Can a man ever make a new start? Can he?"

It was earnest inquiry. From the depth of her girlish faith she answered:

"Yes."

"Ah!" he sighed with deep drawn breath, "the start will be easy enough."

"Yes, I know," she rejoined, her youth jarred, by the years of that day, into penetration. "It will be the keeping up. That will be hard."

"No," he answered, "not quite that. It will be hard to think that it is worth while."

Her spirited face was like a call.

"What is worth while but honour and self-respect?" she cried.

"There are times," he spoke slowly, "when a man is thirsty, parched to famishing, with memories of sun-baked deserts behind, and white bones, perhaps, littering the trail, when nothing seems to matter but the clear lake of the mirage. He longs with all his human man's strength for water. It's happiness he wants. He loses sight of the road, and of a goal beyond to which he must labour. What does he care, with his starved heart, for that city? He wants happiness."

His voice broke. She could feel the love hunger through it, and it disturbed her, made it difficult for her to speak—but she

persisted, despite a strange pull at her heart.

"But it is worth while to gain the city," said the girl's soft voice, longing ardently for wisdom as she spoke. "We must earn happiness. We cannot demand it. You confess that the water and those palms were a mirage, just a reflection from the clouds. But if one has the strength to keep on with the journey and be brave, one day he may come upon that oasis when he least looks for it, just because he was strong enough to seek the goal that was right, and the palms lay straight in his pathway, only he didn't know it."

"A pretty simile," he said. "But I'm just a plain human man, and I know I've missed my oasis."

"Then you won't seek your city," she cried.

"It's a great thing," he said, "to have seen visions. It would be a pity if I didn't live the better just because I had seen mine."

"But," she protested, "would a vision help you in the struggle you are sure to meet."

"Without visions there would be no goals," he said. "But it can't be undone. I've blazed a devious path for myself."

"But the future is ours, ready for the sowing of the harvest," she murmured softly.

"My dear, and you believe that!"

This ex-burglar spoke to her as if she were a child, and so little self-interest entered into this earnest appeal of hers that she did not even notice it.

He went on:

"I see the future. It's bare and hard, but," he braced himself, "it is best, perhaps. There will be fighting."

"And waiting," she added.

Already she read him so aright that it was inaction and not action that she feared for him.

"Yes, there'll be the waiting. Waiting is——" he checked himself, biting his lip.

"The devil," she completed composedly. "That's what you were going to say, and that's what it literally is—the devil. You must work, work, work."

"Work," he answered. "I've never shirked work—of one kind or another."

She saw the hint and it hurt her. Then she said, longing to bring him to the confession which she thought would alone help him to begin anew:

"I saw your match-box this morning."

"And didn't think it was mine—naturally. It was. That was the crest of our corps —Indian Medical Service. Major Keith Travers," he saluted military fashion with a mocking smile. "It sounds rusty, it's so long since I've heard it."

"Keith Travers," she repeated.

"Once a V. C. man. Hard to believe, isn't it? Expedition to Kabul. They thought knocking armed natives about with a bare fist when they turned treacherous and attacked us, being fairly conversant with the languages of the section, and having a gift for disguise as a Pathan merchant, a fakir, a water-carrier and what not, was sufficient warrant for this honour. Mere physical courage, and resource. It doesn't count specially."

"It counts a great deal," said Gwen, her heart warming at his brief recital. "And then you left India?"

He gave a long drawn breath.

"I wasn't missed. The Medical Service did not suffer seriously."

He would say no more.

Gwen felt with absolute conviction that to smother his past, his griefs, his thoughts could only lead to evil again. He needed to get out into the light. How could she induce him to speak?

"And Mrs. Grafton?" she asked.

"Frances!" he cried. "How did you know her name?"

"She was visiting our neighbours. I had seen her, almost met her. She was on her way to India via San Francisco, I knew."

"Poor Frances," he sighed.

"It was a comfort to think you forgave her—first."

"What!" he exclaimed, startled.

"She asked your forgiveness and I heard her. She ruined your life," she cried, in one of those flashes of intuition that are clearer than broad daylight.

"Please don't," he entreated. "She was like a sister to me. We were reared side by side. A man has no right to permit his life to be ruined by any circumstance. Let us leave her out."

"I can't leave her out," she pleaded. "I do want, oh! so earnestly for you to begin again. You can't harm the dead. Why she herself would say, speak! if she could hear. Perhaps she can."

"There is nothing to tell."

"Nothing then—to forgive?"

Against his will she wooed the truth from him, reluctantly, piece by piece, while he lashed himself unsparingly, a wholesome flagellation in which alone lay purification.

The light of day was breaking when they ceased speaking. In his soul, too, it was dawn.

## CHAPTER XIV

### EXIT ERMA

Early Thursday morning Drexel and Erma made their way down Sutter Street, side by side. There was a silence between them. The girl was evidently discontented and impelled more by the situation than by her own will. She realised that the rapid spread of the flames was defeating her plans. Drexel had not obtained the license, and she distrusted him heartily; but to delay any longer meant an inevitable defeat, and she went with him, angry with conditions, and telling herself that in all probability she was beaten, but resolved that she would make a hard fight for it.

The cordon had not yet been stretched at Jones Street, and they succeeded in penetrating to Taylor Street; but the picket warned them off when they sought to enter

the building where Mrs. Addington's offices were located.

Erma's bravado stood her in good stead. She saw that the man with the musket had a soft, yielding face and an appreciative eye for a pretty woman, and so she looked up at him, smiling brightly.

"Come," she said, "now don't be ugly. It will be a serious business for Mrs. Addington. She hasn't come all this time. Those are the windows of her office on the second floor"; she pointed toward them. "I know the word that opens the safe and I alone can save the papers." She smiled at him winningly.

The young fellow eyed her dubiously, inclined to yield and yet doubtful of his course.

"That's a pretty thin story," he said. "Even I could have thought of one as good as that."

Erma turned to Drexel.

"Here is Mr. Drexel, Miss Thornton's fiancé. Perhaps he will convince you that I am telling the truth."

Drexel wheeled on his heel, sullenly. To be seen was the very last thing he desired

in the face of future contingencies, and he could have cursed Erma for her bold move.

"Confound you!" he growled in an aside, "keep me out of this."

"Yes," she answered in a whisper, "keep out of it, and the whole game is up."

The picket was eyeing them, suspiciously.

"Come, play your part," urged Erma.

Then she turned to the soldier with a bright smile.

"He is in an awful state," she said, "he hardly knows what he is doing. He can find neither Mrs. Addington, nor Miss Thornton, or we should not have ventured on this move. Can't you see what hard luck it is to let all those papers burn without making a struggle to get them. Miss Thornton would be the only loser if we did so."

The man hesitated another moment, and then Erma's beauty overbalanced his prudence.

"I am not obeying orders," he said, "but perhaps you are right."

Erma gave a little laugh in her throat, and sped up the stairs. Her triumph made her half forget Drexel and his obstinacy,

as he came toiling up behind her, with a lowering brow. When in the room he paused and looked at her. He had no principle; but the courage for an out and out crime arose slowly within him. Not so Erma.

"Well," she said, looking at him mockingly.

"It's a nasty business," muttered Drexel, "and to call that man's attention directly to me! It's all of a piece with your way of doing things."

Erma set her teeth.

"Oh, no, it is not," she said. "I only wish it were. If it were I would not be such a fool as I am. It was rather a neat stroke though." She tucked her chin down into her jacket complacently. "Oh, no, I am to go on trusting you, and trusting you, and trusting you. That's your plan. Couldn't get a license all day yesterday. That was your plan, too, wasn't it?" savagely.

"I didn't have any plan," said Drexel. "I just couldn't make up my mind."

"He could not make up his mind!" said Erma, addressing the atmosphere general-

ly. "Could not make up your mind! And I knew what you were doing. You spent yesterday honestly hunting for Miss Thornton. You thought you would have her *and* the money. Failing that you have turned to me again. That's just your plan —and nothing else."

Drexel was sulkily silent. That had been his plan. What his next was, he had no mind to discuss with Erma.

"Well, we had better be about it," he said, rising. "Where is the safe?"

With a quick movement Erma went and closed the door leading to the inner room.

"Do you think I am fool enough to let you open that safe unless I am sure of you? Now just let's simply review the situation and see what sort of a hand you hold. I have all the trump cards. First I have the ace—that is the fact that I intend to tell Miss Thornton the whole business, if she can be found."

Drexel gave an angry growl and his fingers worked as if they itched to close upon her throat.

"Next," went on the girl mockingly, "I have the king—which means that I told

that man who you are, and he will be able to identify you. Third," she tallied on her fingers, "I hold the queen—the combination of the safe; fourth, the knave—the fact that the whole thing will tally when those papers are missed. So you see, Chester Drexel, with a hand like that against you I think you had better play fair. No funny business."

Drexel sat down slowly. He felt no inclination, in the face of this exposure of the enemy's hand, to take a move. Then he realised the girl's weak point, and spoke:

"Well, you know," he said, "we can let it go altogether if you don't trust my promise."

She drew near him.

"Will you," she said, "give me your solemn word that if I place this fortune in your hands you will marry me?"

Drexel became suddenly interested. It gave him an opportunity to act, to pose; and posing, especially to women, was the breath of his nostrils.

"Erma," he said softly, "I have given you my word."

She laughed, with a fling of her head.

"And I promise you," he went on, "upon my word of honour, that to-morrow you will be Mrs. Chester Drexel, and then we will light out for the East."

For a moment the girl, despite her distrust of him, was carried off her feet.

"And Europe," she whispered, eagerly, her eyes glistening.

"Europe, and French gowns—and Egypt," went on Drexel, rising to the occasion.

"Yes, Egypt," Erma echoed. "How I have always longed for Cairo."

Suddenly her manner changed and she flung herself away from him, turning her back, her face buried in her arms, which were resting on the door to the inner room.

"What an incorrigible fool I am," she said, "actually believing in the word of this man."

Drexel was regaining confidence in himself.

"It is a case of trusting me," he said, "or it is good-bye to the whole plan."

"No, it isn't," she cried, flashing around at him, "I could carry it out alone."

Nevertheless, she entered the small of-

fice and with trembling fingers began to open the safe.

Drexel's face was a study as he watched her. His eyes grew eager and snakelike, his figure stooped as if ready for a spring.

"There," she cried, as she flung back the door.

With a leap Chester was at her side, and thrust her ruthlessly from his path. His fingers shook as he went through the papers. It did not take him long to sort them. The consols and United States bonds he placed carefully in his pockets with the gold and currency. The other documents were scattered far and wide in the eagerness of his search.

Erma was crouched against the wall, her breath coming in gasps, her eyes fixed on him as if fascinated. A new man was revealed to her, a man with more force and purpose than she had dreamed he possessed. His lips were set, his eyes alert. She had not calculated on such a man as this, and for an instant a sense of fear wavered within her.

Chester rose to his feet, buttoning his coat about him.

"Now we are off," he said.

"Yes, you and I," she answered, "you and I."

He faced her abruptly, his face becoming on a sudden a mask of cruelty.

"You and I!" he mocked. "And so you thought you had the trump hand over me, did you? You!"

He flung her from him with such violence that she fell to the ground. He would have passed her, but she clung desperately to his ankle. As he looked down, she was laughing, a laugh he did not understand.

"You fool!" she said, looking up at him, "and so you thought you were finished—finished with the safe and with me; going away like the idiot you are with a cool fifty thousand still left there to burn."

"What," he cried, starting back.

"Yes," she answered. "Will you never cease to be a fool?"

He rushed back to the safe, slinging the papers about, searching, searching.

She dragged herself to her feet. The life had gone from her movements; her face looked white and blank. She was facing her defeat, but the greed for revenge was

surging within her, as fierce a conflagration as the fire without.

She stole to the window and looked down into the street. The picket stationed below was about to enter the building.

"Come out," he shouted, "the fire is approaching at a horrible pace. It will be here in no time."

"Yes, yes," she murmured back at him, in a low voice, "we shall be down in an instant."

The man stamped his foot impatiently.

"At once," she answered. "Do you think I want to get burnt any more than you want me to? There is lots left in life for me yet. Lots!" and she laughed, though her face looked strange and wild.

She stole back into the room and looked at Chester tossing the papers about, his face mad with eagerness and greed, oblivious of all save himself and his desires. For an instant she watched him, and then stole on tiptoe from the room.

## CHAPTER XV

### A DASH FOR A FORTUNE

Gwen again lay down in her blankets for a snatch of sleep. Her companion had left her for a round of visits to his patients. The sun was just above the horizon when a hand was laid on her shoulder. She awakened with a start, and beheld Travers.

Her first thought was for the city.

"Is it still burning?" she asked, sitting up and hoping for an abatement of the wall of fire.

"Still burning," he answered sadly. "Going toward North Beach now. It is of the fire that I came to speak. I've been reproaching myself for an incredible piece of forgetfulness and but for your excessive weariness I should have awakened you a half hour earlier. As it is I have your breakfast prepared and we must lose no time."

"Time?" queried Gwen, rising and shaking back her hair. "What do you mean?"

"I can't forgive myself," he said. "Your aunt had an office on Sutter Street, I believe."

"Yes," replied Gwen, rapidly re-braiding her hair as she spoke, careless of ceremony and still wondering what he meant.

"There must be papers there of immense value to you, and I've let you go on, and have not done the thinking for you. I—a man."

A light began to dawn in Gwendolyn's mind, habitually careless as she was about her own business affairs.

"And dear auntie gave me the word that opened the safe the very last thing before——"

She stopped, unable to proceed.

"You know the safe combination?" he cried. "This delay has been madness. We must be off as soon as you've had a bite to eat."

"But it may be too late," she said, unable to grasp the full seriousness of the situation, "and the safe is fireproof."

"Even if it is, there may be other papers

of great importance about the office. We should start as soon as possible. Oh! I cannot see how it was that I did not think of it sooner. I am an incredible ass. Why didn't I think?"

"You've had your mind so full of these suffering people. Don't blame yourself."

It was a bare half hour later when Gwendolyn and her companion made their start for the city. The sun was a ball of faint red in the sky, that cast no shadows. Although the fire had died away in their vicinity, it still smouldered fiercely in the burnt district, but was no longer devouring in great sheets of flame. It was like a beast of prey gorged, but still lapping here and there, in the insatiety of its greed. People trudged hopelessly back over the scarred portions of the town, gazing, half believing, prospecting an unknown country, picking out old sites with an effort amid the brick-piled debris.

"Shall you be tired?" asked her companion. "There seems no way for the present but to walk."

"No, no," cried Gwen, upon whom the full seriousness of the situation had at last

dawned. "It is only that it is so slow. The fire may be quicker than we are."

"An automobile will probably be along directly," he said, with an alert look about him, "and if it comes we can hail it."

There was patience in the face he set toward the burning city. It struck Gwen forcibly. His iron will, so plainly discernible in the firm chin, had been long turned toward enduring without hope, and his expression was in such contrast to the spirited aquiline nose and lips, where humour lurked ever toward the surface. But these reflections were forgotten again as her eyes left his countenance to turn toward the glare of creeping red in the north.

"Oh!" she cried, wringing her hands, "will it never be appeased?"

He shook his head and strode on.

Castro Street appeared ahead of them, granite and grey, its rough crown cropping out in the midst of the city. It was surrounded now by little tents, with soldiers standing guard among them. Above a post-box Gwen read: "Any piece of paper, without a stamp, properly directed, will be accepted."

"Uncle Sam is doing his best," she said, with a little laugh to cover the tears.

Two women and a child of six or seven years advanced toward them. The child carried a bent gridiron which had evidently just been taken from the debris, for it was still hot, and the little girl carried it wrapped in a bit of sacking.

"Is that all you have saved?" asked Gwen, addressing the women.

They looked back at her unemotionally. There was no bitterness nor revolt in their strong, simple faces.

"Not so much as that," said one.

They had now reached Market Street. The fire raged below them at the junction of Montgomery and Sutter Street.

For an instant Gwen caught her breath.

"It is not for myself I grieve," she said, "It is just for the city. Surely I shall wake up and find it is only a horrible dream."

At this moment an automobile came into view, an aggressive red machine driven at full speed.

"Stop," cried her companion, holding up his arm, "A lady here needs assistance."

The begoggled chauffeur would have whirled heedlessly past.

"Halt," commanded a tall man clad in khaki. who at the same instant brought his rifle to his shoulder with a snap, and aimed.

The automobile slowed down.

Travers swung open the door for Gwendolyn.

"Will you enter," he said, standing aside respectfully.

Gwendolyn mounted swiftly, with a mental comparison of her costume and surroundings during her last spin in her own motor-car.

The man on the seat growled beneath his breath.

"No more of that!" cried the soldier standing on the brick-strewn street. "I have your number down. Refuse to help a woman again and I'll take your machine. Remember that."

"Where?" asked the chauffeur, over his shoulder, turning a blunt-featured profile toward them.

"We want to get down Sutter Street," said Gwen.

"How far?" with an impatient tilt of the chin.

"Taylor Street," she answered.

The man laughed provokingly.

"Taylor! Can't do it. We are stopped at Jones now. Do you want to get cooked alive?"

Gwen gave her companion a startled glance. His jaw settled grimly combative. He was being attacked along the weakest line in his character. Such obstacles roused a bull-dog determination to conquer that was guided by neither prudence nor judgment. He sat heavily in his seat, his shoulders lurched forward. He was forgetting every consideration but the single one of winning his goal. Such men can be turned aside only by their affections or their sympathies. Had Gwen said one word the plan would have been abandoned. On the contrary in her, too, was roused the daring, pioneer spirit which had carried her grandparents across the prairies amid terrific suffering, and against overwhelming obstacles. Her head rose higher on her shoulders.

"Take us to Bush and Jones, please,"

she said. A design had flashed into her mind.

The reek of the smoke was smothering, although the fire was still blocks away. The man stopped the car at the place named. Gwen and her companion descended and the machine darted back over its course.

The street was crowded by people recently turned from their homes and lingering nearby despairingly, curious spectators, soldiers and police.

At the corner stood the Colonial Hotel.

"If I can only get in there," whispered Gwen, "I think I can make it."

"I am afraid it is no use. You see these people have been driven out," Travers answered reluctantly, keeping a vigilant eye on the police near at hand.

"But the fire is blocks away. I know the combination of the safe perfectly, and if I could only get there it would not be a moment's work."

Travers took in the situation. There was a door opening from the Hotel on the Jones Street side. The attention of the soldiers and the people was turned down Bush

Street, along which the flames were approaching. He could not see just how Gwendolyn expected to get from this corner to the one diagonally opposite, but he was sure she had a plan that was at least worth trying. As for Gwen herself, by a curious chance her mind had travelled back to the time when, as a little girl, her nurse had brought her, morning after morning, to the Madame, who had first trained her in the mystery of French vowels and conjugations. This old lady had lived in a little cottage facing the tiny court which bisected this block and Gwendolyn's investigating feet had travelled down many a forbidden alley lined with unromantic ash and garbage barrels. The little creature had stolen on tip-toe excursions in various directions, dreading the Madame's reproach if she were discovered, and enjoying a delicious sense of naughtiness because of her disobedience.

She and Travers went a few cautious paces down Jones Street. They glanced about, and feeling themselves unnoticed stole into the side entrance of the hotel. Gwen surprised herself by a half laugh, the

old child-spirit of mischief for the moment recurring to her.

The hotel stood wide open, the doors thrown back.

"Let us hunt the cellar entrance," said Gwen.

It was not difficult. They crept down passages and to the rear of the hotel. Gwen hastened forward and threw back the gate. It opened upon a long, narrow alley leading toward the square in the middle of the block, which Gwendolyn remembered. Toward this they moved hastily. Facing on the central space stood three, quaint, old houses with oriel windows. Gwen did not wait to indulge the memories the sight of them recalled. With swift, accustomed feet she approached a corner of this space and opened a gate. This revealed a long, narrow alley running along the rear of the yards of the houses facing on Sutter Street. The ash barrels stood there still, and one lone black cat, its eyes dilated with fear, arched its back on the top of the high fence.

"Shoo! kitty, you'll be burned," said Gwen, chasing it off.

Then came her first discouragement

This alley ended in a blank wall of solid boards. Beyond rose the brown pile of the Wenban Building.

"That's nothing," said her companion, lightly.

He swung himself up and disappeared. An instant later a few kicks had driven two planks from their places. They entered the deserted Wenban by the cellar, all the doors yawning wide, and found their way to the central hall. At the entrance they perceived a soldier on guard, and they dodged behind a turn of the staircase. When the man walked on out of sight they made a noiseless bolt for the rooms opposite, which opened on the Jones Street side.

Here for an instant Gwen paused.

They were in the offices of her physician. The pity of it cut her to the heart. She saw his fine medical library, lining the wall half to the ceiling. Beyond, through a door, she caught a glimpse of his instruments carefully disposed, and of his laboratory, with all the paraphernalia of a scientific, microscopic research. All was in perfect order awaiting the approach of the fire.

But Gwen allowed herself only an instant for the observations.

They threw open a window and both looked out. Soldiers were picketed along the street at intervals.

"It is that stone building, opposite," she said, whispering involuntarily.

Then a new thought struck her.

"Even if we can get the bonds and money and records, they may take us for looters," she cried.

The danger had aroused a curious sort of high spirits in her. Her eyes were dancing.

He shrugged his shoulders, looking down at her calmly.

"You would soon be identified and released, and at the same time you could—give me up to the law."

She had utterly forgotten. Here, in the heart of the city, deserted and awaiting the approach of the fire foe, she was alone with a man who had burglarised her home but the morning before. She had trusted herself to him entirely; in a moment she would put a fortune in gold and currency and bonds into his hands. She gazed back at

him wonderingly, her hands still grasping the granite window-sill upon which she had laid them, meditating a jump into the street below. Still he regarded her calmly questioning, but he had chosen to remind her first. She recognised that in a flash. One call from her would bring the soldier at the corner to her on a run. She was safe still, while he was at her mercy. He changed the direction of his gaze, looking past her out toward the hovering smoke. It was not to avoid her eyes, as she felt, but to give her an opportunity to study him without embarrassment. It was a worn face she saw, lined here and there with the marks of suffering and suppression, but even a two days' growth of beard could not brutalise it. Gwen fancied she heard a quick muffled thump. Surely, yes surely, it was the beating of his heart. It revealed to her the tempest of suppressed emotion behind the quiet exterior. It touched her inexpressibly. She thought of the heart-weary man of last night's revelations and her face grew soft, though he did not see it. When she spoke it was in a matter-of-fact tone, as if she had not perceived the

hint which lay behind his last observation.

"Do you think we can get past those soldiers?" she asked, peering out the window. "There is no time to be lost."

An expression of unspeakable relief crossed his face, and he moved as if suddenly galvanised into life.

"I'll try a scheme," he said, with a boyish laugh. The sudden reaction had made him merry.

He stole past her into the offices at the front of the building. One of the windows was open. He took a paper-weight from the table, an agate pear on a slab of white marble, and stood with it in his hand poised for a long throw. With a lithe twist of the body and swift motion of the arm he sent it, straight as a dart, toward the second story windows of a house a short distance from the corner. He heard a crash of glass, then a shout from the picket, who darted off to investigate.

He returned, his eyes sparkling.

"Let's run," he said, "while they look up this mare's nest."

Taking her hand, Travers fairly flew

with her across the street and into the marble portico of the building to which they had been striving to gain an entrance. Here they paused a moment, crouched against the wall. Then, reassured, they made a swift ascent to the second floor.

## CHAPTER XVI

### GWENDOLYN AND CHESTER MEET

Mrs. Addington's offices were near the head of the stairs, a suite of small, luxurious rooms. The door had been forced by the authorities in their search through the apartments to assure themselves that no one was lingering on the premises. The suite consisted of two rooms and a small dressing-room, which contained a basin with running water, some towels, a mirror, and a few hooks for wraps. The outer apartment had a desk covered with rich appurtenances, a file of papers, and a rack of books. Some pink roses in a tall vase were faded and drooping. What a short time before Mrs. Addington's fingers had placed them there! On the wall were several fine prints; a map of San Francisco in the 50's and another of the modern city. There were heavy chairs, cushioned in dark leath-

er, and about the room hung a faint suggestion of Mrs. Addington's favourite perfume. The breath of it was like a clutch at Gwendolyn's heart. The inner room contained the safe, files of books, and, on a table there was a typewriter which still had a sheet of paper in it half covered with figures, just as Miss Ross had left it on her last exit Tuesday afternoon, escaping hastily, intent on some engagement—for Mrs. Addington had been a kindly mistress. The windows of both rooms were draped with heavy curtains, over which hung portieres of velours.

Gwen and Travers passed through the first room with a glance, but on the threshold of the second they stood transfixed.

The safe was yawning wide open, its contents flung about in evident haste, littering the floor.

"What does this mean," gasped Gwendolyn.

"Burglary, I'm afraid," replied her companion briefly. "Will you look it over as quickly as possible, Miss Thornton, and we will see what can be done."

Gwen was trembling from head to foot.

"Pass me the papers as you find them," said Travers quickly.

With shaking fingers Gwen identified them; bonds; stocks; insurance papers; deeds; and various other documents which she did not understand, but concluded at a venture to save. All the while her mind was travelling off searching for an explanation of the open safe. She had recognised at once that the money had disappeared, but as her aunt had not told her of the existence of the government bonds and the foreign consols, she did not miss them. Her companion watched her movements, but his eyes and ears were elsewhere. Had she observed him she would have seen a pucker in his nostril, a wicked gleam in his eyes, that would have made him a stranger to her. His eyes were intent on a slight motion of the portieres.

With a lithe, noiseless movement of a jungle animal, he went toward it. Gwen heard a cry, a snarl. Turning she saw two men struggling in each other's arms. Another glance assured her that the second man was Chester.

Thus they met!

With great quickness of mind she stepped forward and closed the door into the hall. The lock was broken, so she placed herself before it. She was sick in mind and body, crushed and numb, yet somewhere in the background of her nature still lingered the fighting instincts of her ancestors.

"Let me go," gasped Chester.

"You dog! You dog!" repeated Travers hoarsely, his fingers closing on the other man's throat.

Gwendolyn was frightened by the stony coldness with which she watched this terrifying scene. A conviction of the man's duplicity had seized upon her, finally. He had so deceived her and she had so entirely trusted him. These two last days had been filled to the brim with griefs, fears and disillusionings. She was capable of no more emotion.

"Don't kill him," she said quietly. "He isn't worth it."

Travers released his hold and Chester staggered back, gasping and pulling at his collar.

"I'll guard the door," said Travers, taking her place. "It is a pity you must witness this."

Gwen said nothing. She merely watched Chester's struggles with a sort of impersonal pity. She would feel relieved when his breath came more easily. It did, after a few moments. Then he looked at her, striving to assume an air of ease. He was not a good-looking man now. It was somehow as if the bolts of character had been removed from his face and his features appeared flaccid and meaningless.

They had one and all forgotten the creeping fire without!

"This man has strange manners, Gwen," said Chester, jauntily.

A slow glow of red rushed up Travers' face to the forehead as he heard her name pronounced, but he stood immovable. Gwen did not heed this remark.

"Explain your presence, Mr. Drexel," she demanded haughtily.

Drexel threw back his shoulders with an exaggerated air of gallantry. He was acting and under a terrific strain, and he

overdid his part in voice, manners and gesture.

"Need I explain to you, Gwen," he began.

"You must," said Gwen immovably.

He shifted his feet, pulled at the collar about his bruised throat, and continued less glibly.

"I came here to get this money for you. I remembered it almost too late to accomplish anything. I came at the risk of my life."

"And hid behind the curtain," said Gwen, with a curl of her lip.

"I thought it was the soldiers," he asserted. "They would have put me out before——"

"Before?" said Gwen, lifting a tentative eyebrow.

"Before I had finished my mission and taken possession of your papers," said Chester, with growing signs of uneasiness.

"Which you threw right and left as things of no account," went on Gwen, relentlessly.

He stammered: "I—I did it in my ex-

citement. I was about to remedy my blunder."

"And how, may I ask, did you discover the combination of the safe? Not from me, I am certain of that."

Travers interrupted them. A consciousness of their situation was beginning to recur to him, and he realised no time was to be lost in words.

"You have Miss Thornton's money. You rescued it for her. Very well, then, hand it over to her."

Drexel turned toward Travers, relieved at this opportunity to avoid Gwen's question.

"Upon my word, Gwen," he said, "who is this champion of yours? I have never met him, have I?"

He started on an involuntary hunt for his insulting monocle. It was missing. His hand dropped, but his face slowly lighted.

"Well, really," he said; "this is droll. Miss Thornton, am I to understand that you ask me to hand over the money that I have been rescuing for you, into the custody of Gentleman Jack?"

Gwendolyn had seen it coming. She had

read it in Drexel's face. He had known Travers at a time somewhat remote, and therefore he had not recalled his face earlier. She perceived every iota of the implied insult and she received it squarely. She looked toward Travers. He was erect and undaunted, but pale to the lips. Drexel's face was devilish with spite and mockery.

"Hand over my money to Mr. Travers," she said.

A glow spread over Travers' face as if it had been illuminated from within, but not a feature moved save his lip, which quivered faintly in one corner and then was still.

"Indeed!" cried Chester, breaking into the sudden rage of the weak. "I pass over your fortune to a common thief, a cutthroat, a bully, a nobody-knows-who from nobody-knows-where? I must save you from yourself, Gwen. I——"

"No time for words," said Travers, his ears sharp for words from without. "Hand over the money to Miss Thornton. Miss Thornton, those pockets of yours are capacious."

She held them open with dainty fingers.

"Ready, Mr. Drexel," she said.

"You know I have done this for you, Gwen," said Chester, suddenly weak and appealing, "you know——"

"That my stocks, bonds and records, good only for me, were forgotten," she said, with a curl of the lip, her eyes reading deep into his shifting ones.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Drexel, sitting down and burying his face in his hands. "To be so misunderstood. I cannot endure it, I cannot."

"Time is up," said Travers, and stepping up to him, with a skillful movement, he pinioned his arms. "Now give up the currency; and no more words. We have delayed too long. Ah, and here are papers! Foreign consols, government bonds and—unidentifiable. Cleverer than I thought."

Drexel gave a snarl and struggled to release himself; but in vain. The gold and currency, the bonds and consols, changed hands. Into Gwen's capacious pockets and into Travers' they were put away.

They turned to go, unheeding Chester, when a fierce cry arrested them. He had

seized the brass inkstand from the desk and, with a yell of demoniacal rage, hurled it at Travers. It sped toward him—he dodged, and it struck the door, leaving a great smear of ink on the panels and the carpet.

"Gentleman Jack," shrieked Chester. "A nice champion! My congratulations, Miss Thornton. Times have changed, Gentleman Jack."

With a wild laugh he rushed out into the hall, only to stagger back into the room again, gasping.

"My God," he cried, "we've been mad! The flames have reached us!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### CUT OFF

The dynamiting that had boomed on at regular intervals with resultant vibrations, had deceived them as to the approach of the flames. The fire had come on at a gallop. Even Travers, more alert than the others, had been far from realising the imminence of their danger.

Now, at Chester's words, he rushed to the window. Gwen stood in the middle of the room, silent and motionless, paralysed with fear.

Great sheets and whirls of flame danced and writhed about the front of the houses opposite. The fire was not in the moment of igniting, but in full blast. As Travers watched, their roofs crushed in, sending up a mighty flight of cinders. The conflagration had raged through the street, licking

up the buildings with unbelievable velocity, while they had parleyed with Chester. It seemed incredible! It had advanced in a solid wall, blocks wide. Travers was puzzled to know why the building they were in had not ignited like the rest.

"Wait an instant," he whispered to Gwen, "and I'll go and investigate."

He went to the little dressing-room and wound a dampened towel about his mouth and chin, pulling his hat down to protect his head and eyes as much as possible. Then he removed his coat and held it in advance as a sort of shield.

He ventured to the street door. The blast of hot air that swept in nearly suffocated him. How could they have been so blind as not to have noticed the thickening smoke or rising temperature.

Back, and all about them, writhed the flames!

Taking in the situation, he now understood what had saved them thus far: the building in which they were imprisoned had two blank fire-proof walls against which were built low wooden structures in the hap-hazard fashion of rapidly growing

western cities. These two-story buildings were burning rapidly, the flames licking up against the granite walls of the structure in which they were, but as yet making no impression upon them. Imprisoned! was the word that came to his mind, and his heart grew sick as he looked at the brown pile of the Wenban and the rows of houses on the other side of the street. He realised the truth—they were filled with dynamite and simply waiting the touching of the fuse. He could see the men in full retreat some distance up Sutter Street. All about him the buildings were mined and on the eve of a vast upheaval.

His hair stood out from his head at the helpless horror of the situation. Great masses of masonry would soon be hurtling through the air, crushing through the roof of the building in which they were confined; and besides this they were literally in an oven, for the walls must gather heat in the midst of the surge of the flames all about them, and at any moment might themselves burst out and mingle with the approaching conflagration. He carefully closed both the vestibule and the hall doors

to help keep out the dense and smothering smoke.

"Great God!" he cried, as he turned to spring up the stairs to join Gwendolyn. At the first turn he stopped for a second. A happy thought had struck him. He put his hand in his pocket and it came in contact with the hard, slippery surface of a vial. It was ether. He had been using it that morning in his ministrations to the wounded.

"Thank heaven," he breathed to himself, "she need not suffer."

When he reached the room once more he leaned against the door in sudden weakness. Now that he faced her, the situation redoubled in horror. Chester was prostrate on the floor, his hands clasped across his face, writhing in an ecstasy of terror. His breath came in half sobbing words. He was mad with fear, too lacking in character for action.

Not so Gwendolyn! The great heat and the smoke that had begun to creep in had made her faint. She was seated in her aunt's chair before the desk, her head leaning back against the cushions. Her hair,

which she had worn since the earthquake bound about her head in plaits, had fallen to her shoulders. She had been obliged to discard her heavy overcoat, and her soft lace and silk dressing gown, with its dainty ribbons, protected her shoulders. She had never appealed to him so irresistibly before as she did then, in her weakness and helplessness. He closed his eyes for an instant to shut out the sight of her. Then he staggered forward and fell on his knees, his forehead resting on the arm of the chair in which she sat.

"I was mad to let you come," he cried. "I should have forseen this. I was mad."

He clutched the leather of the chair, feeling too much reverence to touch the ruffle of her sleeve, yet wild to gather her in his arms, to protect her with his own body, if it need be, from the approaching danger. His breath came sobbingly. He was plunged in a despair in which the thought of his own danger had no place.

As his great shoulders heaved in the agony of his unselfish misery, he felt the soft touch of a soothing hand on his hair. It was a motherly touch, as gently selfless

as the maternal stroke on the head of grief-stricken babyhood. Gradually it quieted him; the shoulders ceased to heave; and as he grew quieter, the little touches became less frequent, then her fingers settled on his head and remained there. He looked up, awestruck. He saw her through the film of faint grey that was beginning to sting cruelly in eyes and throat. She was smiling gentle pity on him, smiling!

"Don't grieve," she said, "I can't think it will be long. Somehow I have an idea we'll smother before we burn. It was I who brought you here. Oh, that wretched money! It was I! Forgive me."

"Forgive you," he cried, and suddenly he carried her hand to his lips and covered it and the soft rounded forearm, with kisses.

Kneeling, he looked up at her.

"I love you," he breathed. "I can say it now. I love you. Never in all my life have I loved another woman; I have played at it; I have deceived myself, but I love you, love you, love you."

And as he said it, wild with a longing to clasp her in his arms, he withdrew further

from her. At the last, he thought, when she was unconscious and beyond the reach of pain, he might take her in his embrace and die; but not now.

The heat within the room was suffocating, and the flames increased to a deafening roar.

Gwen struggled to her feet and her voice reached him faintly. She staggered and grasped his arm for support.

"I want you to know something" she said. "I think it is given us near death to understand. I want you to know that whatever you have done, and whatever you appear to have done, I believe in you."

It was his rehabilitation; it was the coronation of the inner man—the man whom neither this world nor its conditions had touched. He bowed his head in silence, too overcome for speech.

At this instant the air was rent with an ear-splitting thunder. Boom! boom! boom! it volleyed. The building rocked like a house of cards and there was a sound of splintered and falling glass. From the floors above them came the crash of shat-

tered beam and rafter, as masses of masonry crashed through.

Gwen reeled and clung to Travers for support. The prostrate figure of Chester crouched with its face pressed to the wall, moaning in an ecstasy of terror.

Travers wound his arms around her cowering figure and stood alert, his eyes strained ahead in speculation. There might be a chance for them now!

He laid her gently in the chair, went to the dressing-room, and returned with two towels which he had succeeded in soaking in the trickle of water that still ran from the taps in the basin. One he wound around her head and another he bound across her face to filter the smoke.

"Slip off your skirt," he said.

She obeyed, mechanically. A moment later he handed it back to her dripping with water. Next he wound the overcoat, also soaked, about her shoulders.

"Now the blasting is over," he said. "We may make a break for it."

She submitted to his directions like a child.

Travers approached the cowering figure

by the wainscot, and gave him a hasty kick.

"Get up," he said. "You have a fighting chance."

Taking Gwendolyn in his arms he went carefully down the winding stone staircase. The heat that swept in to them as he opened the door, cut his breath off short and sharp, so that he gasped and staggered. Then he made another break for it. On the steps he paused for an instant, designing his course. In the moment he stood there the partially levelled buildings on the west side experienced another great shock; there was a report like thunder, and the air was filled with flying black masses, pursued by great splashes of venomous white flame, straight and purposeful, followed by blue curls of heavy smoke. The explosion pushed Travers backward as if he had been propelled by strong hands. He staggered into the hall, closing the door and blinking with eyes which were weeping and red from the reek without.

"Put me down," said Gwen.

He did so, and she stood with her dress dripping black pools on the tesselated floor,

while the heat drew little white clouds of steam from her clothing.

They were both dazed from the shock. Then Travers groaned hopelessly.

"I have seen enough to satisfy me. It is the story of the whole fire; they have waited too long for the dynamiting. The flames are there too, and that whole block will soon be a holocaust.

Without, the fire danced and flickered merrily, amid the shattered remains of the mined buildings.

Travers was, for the moment, unmanned. He walked to and fro like a creature caged. He was so strong. He felt such a vital current aflow within his veins, such a sense of power, and above all the buckling down into character and purpose of a will of late undisciplined. He was a man once more—for what? For death; to be faced mockingly with a conviction of his own impotence against the ruling forces. Just now, when he had resolves—such resolves, and felt within himself the power to keep them. The power had been there always, but he had for the time let circumstances call him master. He

looked at his sinewy hands, he felt his breath rise with a sense of a force for battle; then he turned to a little shapeless figure, huddled weakly against the wall amid a flood of loosened blond hair. There stood his punishment! The anguish of two lifetimes was crowded into the consciousness of his powerlessness to help her.

He stood yearning over her for an instant in a passion of tenderness.

The temperature within the house was increasing with alarming quickness. She clung to his arm with both hands, her head drooping piteously.

"Let me carry you up-stairs," he begged.

"No, no, no," she protested, weak but determined. "Let me walk."

She tottered slowly up the stairs. He saw the tears rolling down her cheeks. He knew, intuitively, that they were the tears of physical weakness, not of physical fear.

"Poor Auntie," she said softly, "after all, it was a mercy."

The memory of that face amid the piled bricks and of the house converted on the sudden to a pyre, turned him sick as he

looked at the girl, and involuntarily he groaned aloud.

"And I brought you here," she said, as if the groan accented an idea hovering in her half-dazed mind.

"Don't," he cried, "don't reproach yourself."

She smiled, gently deprecating—and fainted. He carried her to the rooms they had just left. Chester was in a half-sitting posture, rocking himself to and fro in abandonment of despair. It was a brutal giving over of the intelligence to unreasoning fear. So Travers had seen coolies rock and wait in an apparently hopeless border skirmish.

Travers laid Gwen upon the floor, where he knew the air was least smoke-tainted, and went to the dressing-room for water. The basin he had just filled was stone dry and the trickle of the water had ceased altogether.

The building in which they were confined was burning slowly, sputteringly, reluctantly, from the top down. The cinders from surrounding fires had ignited the roof, but the fireproof sides still withheld

the flames. The heat had grown so intense that he found it impossible to endure his heavy clothing. He removed coat and waistcoat, unfastened his collar at the neck and stood thinking. He took the vial of ether from his pocket and regarded it reflectively.

He did not notice Chester, who had opened his eyes and was watching him with intelligence.

A faint movement from Gwendolyn sent him to her. He knelt by her side.

"Can you hear me," he asked, looking down at her, his whole face glorified with infinite love and compassion.

"Yes," she answered faintly, not moving, for she was suffering from the lethargy of great prostration. Her heart barely fluttered in the intense heat.

"I have a few things I want to tell you before—before it is too late," said Travers, keying himself up to this speech with difficulty.

She watched him, silently questioning.

"I have told you that I love you," Travers went on, "I want to tell you so again. I love you so much that now that we are

near the end I can't seem to think of the past or of a possible future after it is over. It is of just you, you, you."

"That is wrong," she whispered gently.

"Most things men think and do are wrong. Perhaps this love, the best of me, may help—over there."

A feeble little hand touched his and closed about it, a child's clasp, that needed and gave assurance in the dark.

"There is just one thing I can do for you. I am not," his tongue laboured thickly over the horrid words, "going to see you die or the flames lick your body while you live. I have ether here, and my handkerchief. See! When the end draws near I'll soak the handkerchief with this ether and place it over your face. You'll know no pain. I want to give you that assurance."

In sudden temporary strength she rose to a sitting posture. The hand grasping his tightened upon it, then threw it from her in horror. Her eyes stared wide and her lips parted.

"No, no," she cried, "no, never."

He looked at her wondering and misunderstanding.

"But it will only be when there is no hope," he said, blunderingly.

"Don't!" she cried. "Promise me you won't do this thing. Let me die brave, let me die as God wills me to die. Promise me that."

He looked at her in amazement. He felt within himself a hope, not a conviction, that he would fight out this issue to the end. Physical bravery he was not lacking in; but for this slight, delicate girl to take this stand! In his blind, masculine way he had been seeking to rob death of its terrors for her. Even yet he scarcely believed.

"But it will only be at the last, the very last."

"No, no, no," she gasped vehemently, sobbing now from sheer physical weakness. "In God's way—promise me that."

He was silent. She turned and looked deep into his eyes.

He hesitated still, stung to his soul. Then her eyes won.

"I promise," he said, lying as he said it.

She gave a sigh of relief and slipped down close to the wainscot. Her fingers

groped for and held his hand and there they rested.

He felt his head grow dizzy. Was it the crackling of the roaring flames without, or was it only the wheels of fire within his brain that whirled and sung and threatened unconsciousness with every passing second? He gathered himself together with an effort.

Gwen had become unconscious!

"The time is come," he said.

He gathered her in his arms, her form lying inertly against him.

"Good-bye, dear love," he whispered.

As he felt the yielding of her fair young form, there, even amid the smoke and reek of the room and the roar of the flames above and without, the heart went out of him. Could he end it? Had he the courage to take the life that still fluttered faintly in the feeble come and go of her breath? Bending he kissed her softly, reverently.

The whirling of his head warned him. He reached for the bottle. It was gone!

With a cry he started up. Through the grey of the smoke films he saw Chester stretched on the broad of his back. Over his

face a handkerchief, doubled and redoubled, was spread. With a cry of rage Travers dashed at him. The vial lay empty at his side. He had poured its entire contents on the handkerchief. Not a drop remained, and the fumes of the ether, creeping through the heavy air of the room, had added to Travers' own torpor. With an outburst of fury he repeatedly kicked the prostrate form and raved and swore like a madman.

"Coward! Brute! Coward!" he cried.

He stooped, and taking the body by the shoulders he shook it until the head thumped again and again on the floor. But Chester had escaped, and this girl was left that the fire might wreak its worst upon her.

With a choked cry Travers turned, reeled, then fell prostrate, unconscious, his head pillowed on the girl's breast.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A CAPRICE OF THE FIRE-FIEND

It was the morning of the following day. The fire was licking up the houses on the tall hills near the bay, in spurts and starts, easily checked. It was beaten at last, and it admitted its defeat with sullen reluctance. The conflagration had been stopped at Van Ness Avenue, as had been eagerly hoped. Here and there it had hurled its way across the broad boulevard, but it had been forced back after making only a block or two of progress.

The engines were being slowly drawn back into the unburned district, seeking extemporised places of shelter. They no longer shone with the proud gleam of polished brass, but were blackened and almost leadened in appearance. The firemen, their faces sooty and drawn with exhaustion,

clung to them with relaxed hands. They had fought nobly against terrible odds, heroes quiet and unspeaking, as is the habit of heroes to whom deeds, not words, come easily. The city lay behind them, smoking still, a desolate heap of rubbish; a silent, tragic tangle from which the life had perished.

A group of men pushed their way through the waste with an occasional pause for comment.

"Who could have believed it," said one, with a strong purposeful face and a heavy head of white hair, "here we are back in '49 again. We must start all over."

A young man in khaki laughed the easy laugh of youth.

"It's up to us now, father. You built a city and now we'll see what we can do. It will be worth while just to watch it and to help. My job to-day is to stand guard duty while the men throw brick. No room for white hands in 'Frisco."

A third man of soldierly bearing turned to smile at him.

"Good, Walter," he said, "it was worth being here just to see the grit you have all

shown. It was splendid. The British blood will tell."

"Come, come, Colonel," said the first man, as he stumbled over the prostrate rail of a fire-escape lying in the street before him, "don't be so English! Give us the credit. It's American—any credit we may deserve."

"You bet," cried the young man, emphatically.

"Very well, very well," answered the soldier good-naturedly. "But why you Americans are so anxious to disown your grandfathers puzzles me."

"I guess," said the white-haired man, "it's because it's only so lately you English remembered we had grandfathers, much less English ones."

The Colonel was silent. There was truth in Mr. Bell's speech, and he knew it as well as he knew that such distinctions found no lodgment in his own broad mind and heart.

Mr. Bell stopped with a start, gazing up at a fragment of a granite building before them.

"What pranks this fire has played," he said. "Now that building, eight stories in

height, has burned from the top floor down, yet the two windowless walls have, to a great extent, withheld the flames, and three floors are practically uninjured."

"By jove," cried Walter, with a start, "those front windows belong to Mrs. Addington's office. Hadn't we better look into this? There may be valuable papers about that we would do well to recover, if the ghouls have not prowled already."

They pushed back the vestibule and front doors and made their way up the flight of stairs, moving towards Mrs. Addington's rooms. As they did so, to their amazement, the door was opened.

Young Bell's hand went to the holster of his pistol and his lips curled back savagely.

"Looters," he said below his breath, "despite our strict watch, and the Mayor's final words on the subject."

A man, clad only in trousers and shirt, his face ghastly and drawn, appeared and leaned faintly against the doorway. The Colonel gave an exclamation of recognition, his eye searching the other man's face eagerly. His companions were rooted to

the spot, amazed at the Colonel's attitude and expression.

"My God, Travers," he cried, "you here?"

"Hurry," gasped Travers, "in mercy. She may die—she may be dead."

He staggered back into the room and they followed him.

They saw a form stretched full length upon the floor. It was a man's.

In a corner knelt Travers, in his arms a girl's figure clad in a filmy dressing-gown and a black skirt. Her head hung lifelessly back against his shoulder.

"Colonel," said Travers, turning towards him as naturally as though their last parting had not been in the heart of India five years before, "you see it is collapse. She has been in this fearful oven over night. I was unconscious myself until a few moments since." He put his fingers to her wrist. "I can feel no pulse."

He bent his face close against hers, seeking for a sign of fluttering breath.

"My God," he cried, in a burst of fierce anguish, "I believe she is dead!"

He turned his face over his shoulder to

the Colonel in sudden weakness and such a tempest of despair that it moved all three men strangely.

"Let me see," said the Colonel, taking the girl from his arms.

"Why, it's Miss Thornton," said young Walter in amazement.

The Colonel pressed his flask to the girl's mouth—it was useless.

"Give it me," cried Travers.

He forced open the colourless lips and let a few drops trickle in. After a pause the girl choked slightly and moaned. Again a few drops; she moved her head and a deep breath escaped her.

"I believe we may save her," breathed Travers.

Little by little he coaxed the raw whisky into her throat. By degrees life returned, but not consciousness. Her pulse grew slowly in power, but it was still fluttering and uneven.

"Walter, run for an automobile," cried his father. "We must take Miss Thornton home with us."

The young fellow disappeared with alacrity.

"Travers," said the Colonel, laying a hand on his shoulder, "you had better take a drop or two yourself."

Travers looked up for an instant from his task of reviving the girl.

"Do you think it worth while?" he asked with a bitter smile; but he complied, knowing that just then strength meant greater usefulness.

Mr. Bell had turned towards the figure near the wainscot. He started back in horror as he recognised Chester Drexel. The circumstances told their own tale; the handkerchief, the emptied vial of ether. He stood looking down, drowned in thought.

The Colonel joined him.

"Well," said Mr. Bell, "this earthquake and fire lays bare the heart. There is the man we all supposed loved Miss Thornton. See! he has taken all this pain-killing stuff to save himself suffering. There is the girl who faced it out."

The Colonel nodded with compressed lips. He had seen in his day many heroes become cowards where it was least expected. They both turned their backs upon the

dead figure. Mr. Bell glanced towards Travers.

"Who is he?" he asked, as he had two nights previously.

The Colonel simply lifted his eyebrows and looked meaningly at him.

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Bell, with a sharply indrawn breath, his memory stimulated by the Colonel's expression. "The same man?"

The Colonel nodded.

"Well, I give up. Some riddles are beyond the guessing."

The Colonel turned away. He had always liked Travers, let circumstances appear as they might. His old championship of him was waxing stronger as he watched him.

"How the devil did it all come about?" said Mr. Bell thoughtfully, glancing back at Chester's form, across whose face they had replaced the handkerchief. The Colonel had been asking himself the same question and had received no answer. One fact both men read, it lay bare to them; Travers loved this girl over whom he laboured to call back to life.

He turned towards them now with a baffled expression.

"One shot of nitro-glycerine would do it," he cried, "and I haven't an atom with me. She may go yet."

"We'll get her to the house in a few minutes. Walter is sure to return soon and we will have the best of aid," said Mr. Bell, in involuntary pity of the anguish he read so plainly in the face of the other man.

The Colonel watched and wondered—watched and wondered as he had in India when another woman was in the question; anathematised himself for liking and trusting the man before him, the broad-shouldered, soldierly man whom his own army had expelled in disgrace.

"What is it in him," he wondered. "Am I an old fool?"

A moment later Walter rushed up the stairs.

"There is a machine at the door, father," he cried.

"We can move her now," said the Colonel, approaching Travers.

"The sooner the better," Travers re-

plied, hurriedly resuming his coat and overcoat.

Young Bell would have taken the girl in his arms, but Travers made an involuntary gesture of protest.

"I am a doctor," he said. "Perhaps I had better keep her in my charge until we have reached the house."

He turned directly to the Colonel and there was an appeal in his face.

"Perhaps you had," said that warrior, and nobody dreamed of the mental comment he growled to himself: "Perhaps I am an old fool."

An automobile with an apparently lifeless figure in it was no unusual sight in those days, but the soldiers turned to stare as this one sped out from amid the ruins.

Mr. Bell had instructed his son to remain to see to Chester's body, and to examine the room for valuables. The two old men sat on the seat with the chauffeur while in the rear one Travers supported the girl as best he could.

He was going over in his mind the events of the last few days—strange, wild days, overflowing with tragedy, yet to him they

had been full of a sort of happy pain. As he looked back on the last years just past, life arose one vast irony—useless suffering, purposeless sacrifice. Now the climax had been reached in his love for this girl. In proportion as the world had tortured and misunderstood him, the whole strength of his nature had concentrated without division of interest or affection upon this woman, thrown so strangely across his path. He had held her out on the hills a literal prisoner. He had known this, and yet in the selfishness of his sudden intense yearning for her presence he had persisted. He realised now with an undivided mind that if she had been among her friends that they, if not she, would have thought sooner of the safe and its contents, therefore he should be accountable for her death if it followed upon this hideous night of exposure. It was all so of a piece with his life—tangled, useless, drifting. The clutch on his heart tightened as he looked at her. In such a little while now she would pass out of it. It must be so, and for one savage, sudden moment he could have cried aloud at the cruelty of the fate that had cut off

so many lives in the cataclysm that had just convulsed the city, and still left him to drag on his blighted existence. Then in a moment his spirited head lifted again. He told himself that these were weak thoughts. Let him make the best of a bad bargain. There should be no whining.

The automobile stopped in front of a handsome house on one of the city's many hills. Mr. Bell hurried ahead to prepare his wife, while Travers walked slowly up the path with Gwendolyn in his arms.

After the door was opened there was a brief consultation, then a motherly figure fluttered down the steps toward them.

"Gwen," she cried, "my dear, dear child."

"Quietly," said her husband in warning.

"But I can scarcely believe it," she exclaimed. "It is too startling. What are these days going to bring us? Gwendolyn, and in those fearful clothes! There is no use saying anything is impossible, or it will happen, just to prove that you are wrong." She turned to Travers. In his rough dress she mistook him for a working

man. "Carry her up-stairs," she said formally, "and be careful not to slip on the rugs; the floor is highly waxed, and the poor child does not want any more mishaps."

They entered the hallway. The house was partially dismantled. Great patches of plastering had fallen from the walls, and the bronzes and marbles had been removed from their pedestals and placed upon the floor against the recurrence of another shock.

"Poor child! what an experience," Mrs. Bell kept murmuring, as she conducted him up-stairs to a luxurious room on the second floor and directed him to lay Gwen upon the bed. She evidently expected him to leave immediately. He hesitated, looking down on the face on the pillow. Mrs. Bell gazed at him in cold surprise.

"We have summoned a physician," she said. "He will be here immediately."

The situation puzzled her.

"Travers," said the Colonel.

Travers went to him. His face was drawn and ghastly. The Colonel laid a pitying hand on his shoulder.

"Travers," he said gently, "the doctor will be at the door in an instant. The Bells expect to take charge of Miss Thornton from now on."

Travers stood as if turned to stone, then he made a mechanical step toward the stairs. He stumbled slightly.

"Jupiter Ammon!" cried the impulsive Colonel, starting toward him, "I had forgotten you were starving, man. Come and have something to eat at once. Step this way."

"Not in this house," said Travers hoarsely. "I'm taboo. I'll go back to my fellows on the hillside."

He laughed in a strange way that startled the Colonel.

"Come, be reasonable," said the old soldier. "You've had a fearful experience. We are comrades! Don't forget that."

Travers raised his haggard eyes to the other's face.

"Are we comrades?" he asked.

The Colonel's gaze dropped. Before he had recovered his composure Travers was half down the stairs. Here he halted with an exclamation.

"I'd clean forgot. Here is Miss Thornton's money in my pockets.

He took it out in handfuls. One gold piece dropped with a ring and rolled to the hall below.

"There is more in the pockets of Miss Thornton's overcoat—a man's coat," he half smiled. "I'm afraid it was left at Mrs. Addington's office. But young Bell is there, so he will look after it."

The Colonel could not bear to see him go like this. Perhaps his heart went out with unusual affection toward his fellow countryman, here, far from the land of their birth.

He followed him and held out his hand.

"Take it, Travers," he said gravely, "it is the hand of a comrade."

Travers looked at it strangely. Then he leaned weakly against the door and brushed his hand for a moment across his eyes.

"Another joke, a rare joke of fortune. You are just three days too late," he said.

And he went out, closing the door quietly behind him.

## CHAPTER XIX

### LITTLE MONTANA SPEAKS

All that day Travers worked like a Trojan on the hillside. All those who were injured or ill were taken to the hospital, extemporised in the Horace Mann School a few blocks away. At twilight he found himself before the deserted tent. He had scarcely eaten and he was fagged to exhaustion. He welcomed this fatigue, which blunted, in some degree, his capacity for mental suffering.

A voice at his elbow aroused him.

"What's up? Out of a job?"

It was Little Montana. The rustle had gone from her skirts. They were limp and draggled, and her white apron was spotted with blood. She had neither the time nor the material for hospital neatness. There were blue lines beneath her eyes, but the

spirit in her face was undaunted, if her voice lagged a little in its crisp tones.

Travers smiled faintly at her and nodded.

"Same here," said Little Montana, and she seated herself beside him. "I think we have earned a little breathing space, don't you? Eight babies in three days, to say nothing of an assortment of surgical cases, and a running accompaniment of general ailments, is about up to my limit. I guess I'll let Uncle Sam take a hand for a while. He seems to have taken off his blinders some."

Travers nodded at her as one soldier to another.

When she spoke again her voice was lower. She had detected the heart-ache in his face with a woman's ready instinct.

"Where is she?" she asked, nodding toward the tent.

"With her friends, as she should have been these three days," he said bitterly.

"Oh, I don't know," Montana protested. "She did good work up here. Her face was just heaven to those women and she's a wonderful hand at babies. I know the

stuff she is made of and I'll bet she would rather have been here, lending a hand, than lolling up there with opera glasses,watching the fire."

Travers' face brightened.

"I believe she would," he said. Then a moment later a shadow fell across it. "But we had a hideous time over there. Clean surrounded by the fire. Nearly baked. The end isn't yet."

"What!" cried Montana, "not in danger?"

"Heart down to nothing," he answered.

Montana was silent a moment, then she said:

"She's young and strong; she'll pull through."

"God willing," he said.

For some time they were silent. The people moved about them on the hillside. The little woman with the piano had contrived to cover it with a sort of tarpaulin, and beneath the old-fashioned instrument, now her one treasure and in a measure her home, she crept to her sleep. The tent of rare rugs had been moved. Mrs. Davenport and her son had contrived to get word to

their friends, and they had been driven away in a luxurious carriage that set the old harridan again railing against the sins of the rich. Travers could see her now, cooking for the camp of men who had treated Little Montana to dinner the night before. Madam Harridan served the meals to the men, rich or poor, with no unwilling hand. It was her own sex upon whom her curses fell like hailstones. The men she waited upon laughed and nudged one another, well pleased to profit by her foible and enjoy a joke at her expense.

"Won't you rest to-night in her tent," asked Travers at length. "You need it sadly."

"No," she answered, "I'm going to friends. I'll be off in a jiffy. You have earned a rest yourself."

He turned his face away with compressed lips. Montana coloured a little. She knew now how great had been the compliment he offered her. His resting place would still be the unprotected hillside.

Her profession had brought her constantly in contact with humanity and she was a ready reader of the human heart.

She looked furtively and intently at the man beside her. She had had little time during the last few days to consider him, except from his professional side. Now it was the man within she watched. Life had dealt hardly with him, and her alert eyes read the results in his face. She saw the lines a reckless yielding had written there, and which were not entirely blotted out by the regeneration love had wrought. They were there still, but softened and overlaid by the glory of a reawakening.

"You've had a tough time of it," she said suddenly.

Across the unconscious self-revelation of his face dropped the instinctive mask of English reserve. He turned toward her with a cold frown.

Little Montana put a brotherly hand on his arm.

"It won't go, Doctor," she said. "I won't be frozen out. You're in trouble and I've had trouble myself. Lots! Now trouble does three things! It makes us saints, precious seldom; it makes us devils, often; and sometimes it just petrifies. Now this petrifying is bad. It is like the

earthquake. I've been reading about this earthquake in the papers this last day or two, and I figure it out like this. The surface is just the same for all we know, but underneath there is a change, a shrinking down in the depths. The surface goes on all right and dandy until some time, all unknown to us, this strain within, seeking readjustment, strikes a fault, that's what the papers call it, and slide it goes! Then there is the devil to pay. That is an earthquake."

Travers sat listening, astonished and half resenting her penetration. Montana went on:

"Now that's what petrifaction does to us; we don't grow. Down in our souls we are shrinking, but we don't know it. Then suddenly comes temptation, maybe it's only recklessness—the world cares nothing for us, and we long to cuff it back just to readjust the surface that is straining hard in places. Then, in less than no time, everything falls to pieces and we think it is judgment day. It is an earthquake of the soul."

Travers' face set.

"You're right, Little Montana," he said,

"only it is judgment day: the end of all things for us."

"Come, come," said Montana, "that's nice talk from an Englishman who never knows when he is beaten; a man who could work as you have worked these last few days; a man with skill and power to help! That's talk for the chappies with white hands, who couldn't hold a mustang on the trot."

This stung Travers to the quick.

"Oh, I'll stay," he said below his breath, "and I'll work like a thousand devils if I can get the work to do. Can I take an honest man by the hand again? I could cut mine off when I think of it."

"Why, of course you can," said Montana, laughing the relief in her warm heart at his words. "If you can find the honest man's hand to take. That will be the difficulty. Where are these honest men? The men who water stock and cheat widows and orphans, smug-faced church members? The men who build buildings with sham safes in them, such as have come to light in this fire, and caused whole fortunes to be lost? Come, Doctor, don't be sentimental."

She rose to her feet and stood before Travers.

"Now, just you look yourself in the eyes and say, 'Doctor, you have made a mistake, you have petrified. There has been an earthquake; but please God I'll begin all over again.' "

There were tears in her eyes when she ceased speaking, and she looked up at him, her whole face sweet with earnestness.

"Didn't know I could do it, did you?" she said a moment later, a boyish sort of shame at her own emotion. "I keep it down mostly, it doesn't pay, you know. But you are worth slinging a phrase or two. I've seen a lot of the world and I've seen such men as you. Some have the stuff in them and they come up smiling and ready for the next round. Be ready, Doctor. It may be a dandy, but stand by it."

She waved her hand and started down the hillside, her movements a little languid from fatigue, but her face still bright.

Travers straightened his shoulders, reinvigorated. He felt that he was ready for the next round.

## CHAPTER XX

### A STRUGGLE OF SOULS

Travers awoke the next morning with a sense of a great change.

The people were moving about on the hillside. The early breakfasts were started; the sun was shining clear, escaping the smoke-clouds of the lower town. Travers arose on his elbow and for a moment he could not clearly discern whether the change lay in extraneous circumstances or in himself. Soon, with a wave of unspeakable loneliness, he knew it lay in both. She was gone! There was no more of the protecting sense with which he had watched and guarded her, his eyes half upon her and her movements wherever he might be, his ear ever alert for a note of her voice, which seemed to come magically to him from remote distances, as if his heart lent keenness to his ears. His world lay empty.

He picked at the crushed grass with absent fingers. There was no motive for movement.

"Hello, pard," said one of the campers. "Business is dull this morning, hey? I guess you have no objection to the government taking a hand for a while."

"Not the slightest," said Travers, rolling out of his blanket and starting up the hill, pail in hand, springward. Refreshed by the partial bath circumstances permitted, he partook of a light breakfast without starting a fire.

Then he sat down to think.

Just so he had sat beside the trail in the Klondike, an outcast and refugee, fleeing from the anger of men, with his heart growing bitter and more bitter, and his nature hardening into desperation. The world had proved so small, and to its uttermost corners misfortune had dogged him and suspicion had clung to him. He did not deceive himself—it would face him again.

Here in this blighted city for the moment it lay scotched; but how soon would it rise as the town gained in strength? With their fortunes once more assured, men would

turn in their immunity to accuse him again. He could lose himself, he knew. In the heart of China, perhaps, or in Borneo, or Java, or he could join the riff-raff that floated in corners of South Africa—in the companionship of consciousless men, happily, hardily indifferent; but among gentlemen that spectre must rise up again and accuse.

Slowly he had sunken beneath the persistent doubts and suspicions in the faces turned toward him. He had lost faith in life; faith in the ultimate triumph of right; lost faith in men; and by an inevitable fossilising process, his moral sense had grown dulled. He had mocked at humanity; mocked at society; until at last the time had come when he had sinned—sinned under no especial stress of circumstance and with no thought of gain or self-interest, rather in a cynical amusement, a daredevil snapping of his fingers in the face of pursuing fortune. It was an objectless crime, a tacit accepting of the rôle fate cut out for him.

He was considered a thief, and so everyone had turned against him. He had not

been able to obtain a position where his evil reputation would not follow him, and it seemed impossible to earn money honestly. If he appeared to be a thief, why not become one, and warrant the suspicions of others?

"I have the reputation; so be it then! Behold me, Travers—the thief."

He had taken no elaborate means for evading justice. To have been taken red-handed would have been but the climax of the whole mad tale of unjust persecution, moral deterioration and spiritual capitulation. He would have laughed in the face of his judges and pleaded guilty without a blush.

Then had come the earthquake, bringing with it all its attendent horrors; the legions of fears; the thunders of the unknown and the unguessable—and this girl, defenseless and bereaved, had been thrown suddenly upon his mercy. Travers the man, awoke! The ice from about his heart had melted; his blood had flowed; his spirit had lived; he had come once more into his own.

And now, he told himself, he must go on. No more stilling of the voice of conscience,

no more yielding to the stress of circumstance! He must go on, face the worst life had to give, consciously, seriously, manfully.

And with this thought foremost in his mind there was a dignity in his bearing, an upliftedness in his face, when he turned to meet the Colonel that morning in the Bell's drawing-room, whither he had gone to return the package of Gwendolyn's jewels.

He looked strong, soldierly and alert in the soft light that came through the filmy curtains. The Colonel paused on the threshold and regarded him with grave attention. No greeting passed between the men. At the sight of his old officer standing scrutinising him with stern, searching eyes, a conviction seized upon Travers that he was again to be faced with the old trial —now with his resolution fresh upon him he was to be put to the test once more.

He compressed his lips and his eyes flashed. He was ready; but one cry went up from his heart, torn and bleeding with the thought of his parting with Gwendolyn; not even breathing space for a holier sorrow. So be it!

Never for one instant did he believe that the blow about to descend upon him was aimed by Gwendolyn's hand.

"Travers," said the Colonel, solemnly.

Travers saluted, military fashion.

"Here, sir," he said. There was a faint, brave smile upon his face.

"Yesterday I offered you my hand," said the Colonel, sadness gathering in his eyes.

"And I refused it!"

"Yes, I know you did," said the Colonel, beginning to pace the floor with troubled footsteps, "I know you did."

The silence continued unbroken for some minutes. Travers stood like an officer waiting commands.

"It troubles me greatly," said the Colonel. "It was bad enough over there, but it was, as it were, in the family and somehow I never could believe it of you, let appearances be what they might."

"I thank you, Colonel," said Travers. He was touched by this old officer's evident distress.

"Confound these detectives," cried the Colonel, in a sudden outburst of irritation.

"I should think they would have enough to attend to at this time without meddling with this affair. It seems they know the famous jewels of our nobility as well as they know the fingers of their hands."

Travers began to foreshadow the direction of the attack. He thought of Mrs. Grafton's words: "It was those very rings, Keith." The poor woman in her insensate love of the jewels had ventured to wear them here among strangers in an outburst of vanity, as inexplicable as her mad impulse to possess them had been.

The Colonel's next words confirmed his suspicions.

"The fact is," he said, pausing and watching Keith's face with the eyes that had spied out secrets before then in the subtlest of Eastern faces, "Lady Maud's jewels are discovered."

"I am glad—for Lady Maud's sake," said Travers gravely.

"Hm," said the Colonel, still regarding him.

Travers returned his gaze, simply, honestly.

"You perhaps don't realise the difficul-

ty," went on the Colonel. "The whole story is known, that affair at Delhi. It's damned awkward! I suppose they think they are showing their mettle. They were here this morning, before breakfast," with increased indignation, "and I most heartily wish that famous yellow pearl and green diamond were in perdition."

"The black pearl, and the blue diamond," corrected Keith, with a twinkle in his eyes. He had suddenly grown gaily indifferent. He vitally valued but one thing in this world—one woman's good opinion. That he had sacrificed, and his reputation was gone forever. No officer in his old regiment could again regard him without aversion. His family connections were distant ones who had congratulated themselves since his disgrace, at the slightness of the blood tie between them. He felt more troubled now for the Colonel's evident distress of mind than he did for himself.

He utterly ignored the possibility of righting himself by accusing the dead woman. That idea did not formulate itself in his mind.

"Now, Travers," said the Colonel, turn-

ing to him, "can't you give an explanation? Won't you, even at this late day, say something?"

Travers stood and looked at him. Through his thoughts flitted a vision of General Grafton and his pride in his gay young wife. He could see him, bowed in sorrow at the blow which had taken her from him under such tragic circumstances. He shuddered as he thought of the dead woman out upon the hill; and there were the children—three of them! He could hear them, see them as they clambered over him in one of their famous frolics. Should he blight four lives to restore his reputation, place himself right with the world. He had faced this temptation once, long since. Now again it arose to challenge him. Then he remembered that hideous dawn; he saw himself again before the jewels on Gwendolyn's dressing table, while her affrighted eyes gazed back at him from the pillow. No, he would shield the General, shield the children, shield the memory of the dead woman, and not hide himself behind her with the knowledge of a cowardly crime facing him out of the immediate past.

"Let me be true to something," he thought to himself.

"Have you nothing to say?" urged the Colonel.

Travers' voice was low as he answered bravely, but with a heart heavier than he had felt even during the last pain-filled hours:

"Nothing."

A soft-toned exclamation caused the men to turn. Gwen stood between the portieres, clinging to them in evident weakness, but there was no lack of spirit in the direct gaze she fixed upon Travers. In his joy at the sight of her he forgot everything but gladness. He stepped toward her, his face irradiated.

"You here!" he cried.

She did not smile nor respond. Her eyes accused him.

"I must apologise," she said. "I was lying in the adjoining room in a half doze when your voices awakened me. I have played eavesdropper without intention. I did not dream that your conversation would take so serious a turn."

The Colonel coloured with embarrass-

ment. Despite any philosophy, he felt a shame in his fellow-countryman's disgrace.

"I am sorry, Miss Thornton," he said. "But I suppose the story will soon be public property; it can't be helped."

"But it can be helped, Colonel Merriton." said Gwen with conviction. "Let me sit down. I have much to say and I still feel shaken."

The Colonel helped her to a chair with gallant alacrity. He was amazed at her words.

Travers stood as if transfixed, awaiting the next move of the game. He felt no anxiety, for he had abandoned hope. He watched her face hungrily, feeling assured he should see her no more.

"Mr. Travers," she said, turning toward him, "did you say a moment since that there was nothing to be said in your defense against that horrid accusation?"

"I did, Miss Thornton," Travers replied gravely.

"And why," she leaned toward him, her fingers interlacing, "why did you say that? Was it the truth?"

It was easier to tell an unselfish lie than

to protest it to be the truth. Travers coloured, bit his lip, and hesitated.

"Was that the truth?" she persisted.

The Colonel grew as alert as a hound, who, having lost the scent, comes suddenly upon a new trail. His blue-grey eyes sparkled as he intently listened to this strange dialogue.

Still Travers hesitated. Gwendolyn watched him in silence, as if she would compel a confession from him.

"You know the truth, Miss Thornton," he burst forth at last, in a tone of sudden appeal, "and knowing it I beseech you to be merciful."

"To whom," she asked, "to you?"

For a few seconds he was silent, then he said, shamefacedly, "Yes, to me."

A change came over the girl's face. Her eyes grew wide and bright, her mouth hardened.

"Ah, that was it, then. You loved that woman," she cried.

The Colonel's eyes snapped. They were indeed opening up new ground. His intelligent face grew suddenly blank, appearing to see least when most was reveal-

ing itself to him, true to his long habit in dealing with Easterners.

Travers started at Gwen's unexpected attack. He opened his mouth for a hasty contradiction, fought it back and weighed the situation carefully. Then, masculine fashion, he blundered horribly, precipitating what he sought to avoid:

"Yes," he said, in a low voice.

Gwen started up with an exclamation. The blow was so sudden that it overcame her self-control. She could not meet it sitting. She felt the indignation women have felt from time immemorial, be they loving or unloving. He had protested his love for her with a passion that had moved her to the soul, only the day before, and now he sought by every sacrifice to save the name of the dead woman upon the hillside. He had loved that woman it was quite clear. His action had shown that from the first, over there in India, and again here when her deed had faced him once more. He had loved that woman and had lied to her, Gwendolyn.

But as she looked up at him the strange unaccountable charm of his personality

held her still. It held her, as it held the Colonel. She longed to hate him. She strove, as she stood there, to tear down all the attraction his presence had for her. She tried to recall all she had known of him which had inspired her with fear and contempt. In vain! All the earlier impressions were blotted hopelessly out by a conviction of an innate nobility in the man, obscured but not obliterated. The man who might have been, was clearer to her inner vision than the man who had been. He appealed to her so irresistibly that she felt a natural impulse to draw nearer to him, despite the sudden pain of jealousy and disappointment. She stood supporting herself by the table with both hands.

He turned away from her abruptly, unable to bear the anguish of appeal in her eyes, or to endure the effect of his own noble falsehood. He went to the window and looked out, though he saw nothing. He was hoping, in a numb sort of a way, that the interview would soon be over.

"What can we do with him, this man?" asked Gwen in a low voice to the Colonel. She went to him like a child to her father,

looking up at him with simple questioning, all selfishness dying from the struggle. She stood beside him, taking his arm for support, seeking, too, for the strength of his masculine judgment. She was striving with all the might of her heart to compass her end before Travers interfered.

"He has told me the whole story," she said. "It was the truth. He told me out there by the fireside on the hill. It was the truth," she repeated again. "His heart was breaking while he told it. I had feared him, feared him horribly, and the impulse to gain my confidence made him confess what he now denies. He never stole those jewels. It was the General's wife. Grafton General Memsahib." She echoed Travers' words unconsciously. "It was she. He denied it to save her." Suddenly her hands went to her face and she sobbed: "To save her."

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish," said the Colonel, without elegance.

What was he to believe? Might it not be but another falsehood, a damnable falsehood, to gain this confiding girl's regard?

He fought back his old illogical, uncon-

querable liking for Travers and strove to read the truth without prejudice, in his face, which was white and drawn as he turned back into the room from where he stood by the window.

"Why did you do this?" said Travers to Gwendolyn, his voice full of tenderness. "Don't you see it takes from me my last opportunity to make amends? Can't you realise how useless it all is?"

He was shaken to his depths. He so longed to read in Gwendolyn's eyes a gleam of respect to which he could honestly lay claim. He did read something in her face which set the blood drumming in his ears. It made it more difficult for him to brace himself anew for the sacrifice upon which he had determined. The old General and the children must be spared. He repeated the thought to himself again and again, in his determination to conquer himself, until it almost lost meaning in his mind. He was in the travail of a very great temptation.

The Colonel's clear eyes read every phase of the soul's struggle. He turned to the girl.

"But this confession of his may be mere words—words."

"No," she protested. Then she shuddered. "It was so horrible I can't think of it."

"Don't, don't," implored Travers.

She faced him suddenly, strong and spirited.

"I'll tell the whole truth," she said.

"Then I too must tell the whole truth," said Travers sadly, but with conviction.

Gwen turned white to the lips.

"But that is our secret—my secret! You dare not tell it."

"Except to save others from useless suffering," he persisted.

Gwen swayed as she leaned against the table, and then with a burst of wild sobbing, she sank upon the couch.

"You are cruel," she cried.

Travers stood with his soul in his eyes, watching her. The Colonel went to the girl's side and then turned and faced the silent man before him.

"Explain this confounded riddle," he cried; "it would try the patience of Job himself."

But Travers closed his lips obstinately. The girl spoke first.

"She was here, Mrs. Grafton," she began, addressing the Colonel.

"Here," cried that officer in amazement.

"Yes," went on Gwen. "She was visiting friends, en route for India. She fled in the earthquake and was wounded by falling debris."

"Great heavens," muttered the Colonel.

"By chance she was brought to my tent, horribly mangled"; her breath came in gasps as she spoke. "Two fingers had been cut off by the ghouls—for her rings. As she regained consciousness I heard her say, and the nurse too heard it: "Keith, is that you? How horrible! It was those very rings. Forgive me!"

"God!" muttered the Colonel, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

He was staggered. For some moments he paced the floor before he paused beside Gwen in a stupor of horror. Then Gwen rose to her feet and approached Travers. He lifted his eyes, heavy with reproach, to her face.

"You've spoiled four lives," he said.

"I've saved—two," she answered, looking up at him bravely, her face dyed with blushes. "Yesterday you told me that you loved me, and I said that I believed in you. When a woman believes in a man with all her heart, be his past what it may, she loves him."

This confession took a rare type of courage.

The Colonel listened amazed. Even amidst the recent horror of her revelations his old heart glowed at the girl's words, at her attitude.

Travers staggered, then sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands.

"I have not the strength," he breathed, "I have not the strength."

Gwen drew back, all her womanly reserve in arms at this unexpected move. She wrung her hands together.

"What am I to do?" she cried, turning to the Colonel. "What *am* I to do?"

"Go, dear," he said, laying a gentle hand on her head. "He and I must have this out together."

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE HEART LAID BARE

When the Colonel returned to the library Travers was still seated by the table, his head resting on his arms, which were folded upon it. His attitude was replete with exhaustion and despair.

As the Colonel looked at him his eyes grew moist. He was glad, he told himself, that he had never thoroughly renounced his faith in this man. He pitied him now from the bottom of his soldier's heart, beholding in him a vicarious sacrifice to the abominable vanity and cupidity of a sex, which the Colonel never met at close quarters if he could avoid it. He never understood women and, like a true Briton, the Colonel always expected something sinister in what he could not understand.

Travers retained his position without a

movement, while the old officer contemplated him, before he laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Travers, old man," he said, his voice a little husky, "I don't want to appear to coerce a confidence. Don't tell me anything you feel inclined to withhold; but don't you think it would be wise, on the whole, to make a clean breast of it? Remember, we are brothers-in-arms."

"It is useless," said Travers, raising his head, his face grey with heart-weariness and physical fatigue. "It has all been so useless. Why should I speak?" His lips set suddenly, in the obstinate curve of silence. "And what is there to say?"

"I have seldom found much good come of anything but the truth, Travers," said the Colonel. "What we want in this world is circulation—free circulation of the air, of the blood, of the truth. It is the only path to health of mind or body.

Travers settled back in his chair and looked at him, his head sunk forward on his breast.

"It is a natural philosophy for you, Colonel. It has been your battle-cry."

"It should be the simple axiom of every honest man," said the Colonel.

Travers leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his chin on his palms, reflecting.

"Sometimes the path is forked and one must choose."

"Between what?" cried the Colonel, indignantly.

"Between justice—and mercy."

"Ahem," said the Colonel, abashed, taking a step or two down the room. Then he returned and faced Travers, scowling. Travers had seen that scowl before, and he smiled again as he had then, a faint and wintry smile, though underlaid by the old affection.

"You are playing with words," said the Colonel sternly. "Juggling with the truth is unworthy. What good comes of it? What good has come of this?"

"There is the General, and there are the children," said Travers softly.

"And that woman?"

"Lies out on the hillside, poor creature."

Travers shuddered.

"The General must know of this," said

the Colonel, trouble in every feature of his kindly face.

"I have taken steps to inform him—of her death, poor old fellow."

Travers was again lost in a maze of painful memories.

"Who could have thought it?" cried Colonel Merriton, resuming his military stride to and fro. "Poor old Grafton."

"Yes, poor old General. You'll never let him know, him or the children?"

These words brought the old officer to an abrupt pause.

"It is a damned difficult position," he muttered. "A good man's character is of some account. You are young and you're able, and your whole life lies before you. You should be reinstated. We need such men as you are, with our army full of carpet knights. Why, Travers, do you remember when we surprised that uprising in Assam? Wasn't it great work? It makes a man's heart leap just to remember it."

Travers' heart leapt too. A flame flickered for a moment in his eyes before it died away.

"The General and the boys must not know," he said, dully.

Once more the Colonel resumed his walk, running his fingers through his hair, until his few remaining locks stood on end.

"It is a damned difficult position," he muttered. "A damned difficult position."

Travers rose and stood before him. His eyes were determined and compelling.

"There is one of me," he said, with slow emphasis. "There are four of them—five, for Frances' memory should be considered."

The Colonel nodded despite himself.

"And I weighed all the costs out there." Involuntarily he sighed. Not all the cost, as he realised now, for how little he knew there was to be a Gwendolyn to reckon against, too. But he would not permit himself to think of that. He went on:

"I'm a lonely man, and I belong to no one. There would be hardly a soul in this world to weep if I died. Just a few fellow-soldiers to blow their noses rather more loudly than usual, and take an extra dash of whisky in their soda."

"That counts," cried the Colonel, indignantly.

"Of course it counts. Don't I know that?" For an instant he bit his lip, then he continued: "Frances and I were reared side by side. Her father and mother were father and mother to a little orphan, whose parents were buried out in the jungle somewhere. People don't even remember the name of the district very distinctly. If *they* hadn't cared for me, who would? And Frances"—his voice grew low—"always, from a child, I shielded her. I can't account for it. It must have been mania. What else was it? There was no reason for it. Many a time I've surprised and coaxed things from her, trifles, that there seemed so little object in"—his lips would not frame the word stealing—"appropriating. Yes, surely it was mania. Why, the General was liberal with her to a fault, and taking those rings was worse than reckless. Those stones were historic; they were known everywhere, and evidently she did not even change the curious and ancient setting. Why, you see even here they were recognised."

The Colonel nodded and added another mental execration against the meddlesome police.

Travers went on. It was a relief from the tension of years, this confession to the Colonel. The matter had been taken from his hands, and he could speak freely and without self-reproach.

"We were playing cards. Lady Maud had removed her rings, for the stones were large and annoyed her. A few moments later when we started a new hand she perceived that the rings had vanished. No one had entered the room, not a punkah-wallar, not a kitmagar. The rings had lain on the table in plain sight. Lady Maud looked horribly embarrassed, and insisted that she had probably been mistaken and had not worn them that evening. Frances started off on a search for them. I remember she crept under the table and looked white and queer. It was an undignified thing for her to do. The General was in a dreadful temper. He would not accede to Lady Maud's suggestion. 'I saw them myself, not a moment since,' he insisted, 'I saw them myself.' I can hear him still."

Travers paused, frowning in a troubled way at the unpleasant memory.

"Well, you know the rest," he said abruptly. "It wasn't the General—it couldn't be the General's wife. I was asked to resign. They did it decently. I can see the fellows' faces now, as they turned away from me."

"And Mrs. Grafton?" asked the Colonel, stonily.

"I can't account for her," answered Travers. "Unless she yielded to a sudden temptation, and then there was such an awful row she lost her head, and didn't know how to put it right. That seems the most likely solution."

"You've had a tough time," muttered the Colonel.

Travers lowered his head and his voice sank. He spoke rapidly, hastening on the narrative. It was no mere narrative to him. It was a soul confession, the story of a battle and a defeat.

"I couldn't hide in the old world. You know it, a mere Piccadilly, every inch of it, where acquaintances bob up like mushrooms. I tried New York. It wasn't much

better. The story followed me and decent men avoided me. Then I went West to the Rockies. In some strange way, from some source, that horrid tale would come. I got to having a premonition about it. I would feel it in the air, know it was coming, like the prickle of an approaching thunderstorm, before I looked up and read it in men's eyes. Men who shot at sight; men who cheated at cards; men wild and reckless—one and all tossed that jibe in my face as though they were saints and I the only sinner. I got to thinking life had a grudge against me and that, I believe, was when I first began to shrink."

He was reverting to Little Montana's words of the day before.

"I grew hard and reckless; I rode madly; I gambled madly; I drank madly. Then another impulse seized me to get away from it and try again. I went to Alaska, not only to Alaska, but far off to the north, above latitude 65. There aren't many scruples above latitude 65," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders, a nonchalant gesture, an echo of the spirit which had then possessed him. "But they liked me

and I got on. I wasn't getting any better, but I was fossilising comfortably. They thought me a good companion, and left my past alone as I left theirs. We were conscienceless villains, but we enjoyed life as a whole. Then one day, over a game, the stakes ran high. As usual my evil fortune turned against me. A good half dozen bags of gold dust were swiped, disappeared as clean as a whistle. There was a row, a shout and a search. Of course they turned on me. Why not? I had a record for just such another job. I suppose the thief got away in the shuffle. They found nothing, but what did that prove, north of latitude 65, when men's blood was roused? I struck trail and lit out. The Indians took to me, or I should never have been heard of again. Just as well perhaps, if I hadn't. I had a lot of time to think on the trail, with a sore heart, bleeding feet and an empty stomach. It was the kind of thinking that turns honest men thieves."

He rubbed his hands, palm against palm. He did not seem to notice the Colonel.

"When I reached 'Frisco the story was there before me. It was public property.

It had been published in letters two inches high along the top of one of the journals. You know the kind? You see I was an Englishman of some position, and they thought it would make good reading, and there were plenty of Klondike men about to identify me with the 'Gentleman Jack' of the story."

The Colonel nodded British contempt for the American newspapers.

"But I had arrived at the don't-care stage. That was when I turned the corner and went straight to the devil." He moistened his lips, for they were dry. "I had no place in this city. I was a pariah. I tried anything my hand came to. It was no use. It was 'Gentleman Jack of the Klondike' who got his congé at regular intervals. I was a street-car conductor until they turned me off. For a time I was a retail boot-clerk; then little by little there seemed no place for me but the saloons along the water-front. I thought I knew the world, but I heard yarns there I hate to think of to-day. Gradually, so hardened and hopeless had I become, always with a grudge against the fate which I felt was

pursuing me, that I began to scheme in my mind how nice, clean, gentlemanly robberies could be committed. I had a contempt for those men who told their stories in hushed voices, heads close together over their beer. I thought intelligence ought to tell, and I'd plan, as I heard them talk, how I should have done this job or that. It was a sort of game, a thought I dallied with; but such thoughts breed deeds. I had fallen into weak submission to circumstances, I had given up the fight. I didn't care for burglary for its own sake. I had never loved money, perhaps not enough, for a certain caution is a safeguard. But I was like a man at Monte Carlo who feels no especial interest in the game, yet who longs to work out a combination of his own, just to see how it will turn. I grew less listless. I became faintly interested. All the moral issue had died."

He leant forward, his hands hanging between his knees, his face like a mask.

"Jupiter Ammon," muttered the Colonel. "Who could have thought it?"

This low-voiced, lifeless recital opened to him the consciousness of a tragedy more

terrible than Mrs. Grafton's horrid end. He had known Travers the lighthearted, the chivalrous, the courageous.

"The opera season offered me the opportunity I sought," went on Travers.

It was some time before he could continue, struggling with this point of his narrative, which was to him the most painful.

"I watched Miss Thornton's party at the Palace Hotel. Miss Thornton was nothing to me," his hands suddenly gripping one another. "She was just a pawn in the game I wanted to play. The next morning I played the game I was waiting for. Miss Thornton sat long at the window and delayed me. My new philosophy did not include murder. I was tolerably indifferent about jail—I just wanted to play the game. I kept telling myself: 'Well you're doing it, it's what you must have been born for. Life has egged you on. Go on, go to the devil, go to the devil.' "

"What!" cried the Colonel, "you——" He stammered over the words.

"Burglarised Miss Thornton's home. The earthquake interrupted. I wasn't counting upon earthquakes." He put his

hand to his bulging pocket and pulled out the package. "Here are the jewels, safe, I think."

He rose to his feet and threw back his shoulders, as if a weight was off his heart.

"Now, Colonel," he said, in half-pity at the old soldier's evident bewilderment, "What a riddle I have set for you! You didn't expect this."

"No," said the Colonel, honestly nonplussed, "I didn't."

## CHAPTER XXII

### TRAVERS RETURNS TO THE HILL-SIDE

The Colonel was fairly faced down. To his clear code Travers' crime had been an odious one; he could not deny it to himself. He looked at the well-shaped head and the determined face, and he tried to associate it with the ugly, cowardly act of a deliberate burglary. It was impossible. Travers, the soldier-surgeon, he saw clearly defined; or the man who sacrificed himself nobly and unselfishly for others, and his heart softened. But the devious downward path by which he had arrived at the deed which he had confessed to him—on that the Colonel hated to dwell. It was ugly, despite any reasoning of his. He began to wonder if there were not a moral rift somewhere within the man which conditions had developed. The Colonel had not devoted

his upright, unanalysing mind to the downward-impelling process of suggestion, the demoralising effect of repeated suspicion carried over a period of years, until a man or a woman loses self-faith and floats down the current public opinion charts for them. How was the Colonel to know this? He knew that he pitied Travers, but that he had been a burglar! However kindly the Colonel might have felt toward the man, that set him outside the pale forever.

He felt horribly embarrassed, and heartily wished himself out of it. He caught Travers' eye fixed directly upon him. He was being studied, he felt, and he was not playing up to his rôle. He began to grow indignant.

"Well?" he said questioningly. He was in no mind then to be judged.

Travers rose and threw out his arms with a hopeless gesture.

"Now you know why it was best she went away," he said.

"Well, women are strange beings," said the Colonel. "And she knew this?"

Travers nodded, a world of woe in his face.

"Isn't it a farce," he cried, "for this to be given me—now?"

"The girl has gone through so much. It is no time for her to judge her feelings or see things relatively," said the Colonel. "She'll have a different view in a few days."

It was Travers' condemnation. He put his hand before his eyes, suppressing a sharp exclamation. He had judged himself as unforgivingly as another possibly could, but when the Colonel spoke the words that were circulating in his own mind the iron entered his soul. The Colonel turned away, pretending not to notice his emotion.

"I want you to know it was splendid of you," that officer said awkwardly, "almost inconceivably so, for you to sacrifice yourself so nobly for the General and the babies, but of course you can see there could be no reinstating after this."

"Have I asked it?" queried Travers, with sudden sharpness. "Have I suggested it?"

"No," said the Colonel in embarrassment.

"Then why make this needless statement? I'll go now." He rose with dignity. "Take the jewels to Miss Thornton. I haven't opened the package; I suppose they'll tally," he smiled bitterly.

"But I don't like you to go like this, old man," said Colonel Merriton.

Travers drew himself up.

"I must go, there is no other course. But I'm going to try again. I'll try again," he set his teeth, "in spite of the devil himself."

Travers went back to his tent on the hillside.

He did not linger by it long. There was always work to do there—to help the poor, to quiet crying babies. He was a great hand with babies, mothers told each other, feeling they were bestowing the highest compliment on him. He took his shovel and reconstructed the trenches about the tents, which the ignorance of the hill-dwellers had dug so that they served as mediums for conveying water within the slight structures, when it rained, instead of deflecting it from them. He rebuilt a brick oven with an ill-constructed wooden flue that threat-

ened all the tents in the neighbourhood. He participated in the bringing to perfection of a pan roast, amid general admiration. He rubbed a liniment into the aching joints of a near-by neighbour, whose case was not considered sufficiently serious for hospital treatment. In fact he played handy-man without pause.

One girl whispered to another: "Somethin' has happened to him. You see the girl has went. Well, there ain't no accountin' for taste," and she tossed her head defiantly.

Yes, something had happened to Travers, and he was striving to seek out his own salvation by ministering to the needs of others. He thought there was no other way; in it alone lay sanity, and the power to save himself—in work, work, work!

He struggled, without appetite, through a supper of baked beans, with the men in "Zindkand's Café." They felt an inclination to jolly him on the disappearance of the pretty girl, but something in his face restrained them, and they contented themselves with sly winks and nudges when his hand paused in its passage from his plate

to his mouth, his eyes fixed unseeingly before him.

There was no light, save that from the dance of the dying camp-fires, when he returned to his tent. As he moved down the hill he started and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"I am dreaming," he said, and looked again.

A fire, not of his own lighting, glimmered before the tent, colouring it dull crimson and yellow. A familiar figure sat watching it, a figure in a black overcoat and skirt, and a cap rested on the plaited hair.

Travers stopped short.

"It is mania," he muttered, "I must look out for this."

As he came up, the figure turned to him, as if she waited, and he saw the sweet, spirited face in all its alluring perfection. He went on, drawn in spite of himself, and stood staring. Still he did not believe. The girl looked up at him and smiled.

"I have come," said the vision softly, but as if a will lay hidden somewhere behind.

"Gwen," he cried, springing to her side, "what have you done?"

"Come back to the camp," she answered shyly, but triumphantly.

"But you shouldn't, you shouldn't," he exclaimed, though he was mad with joy at the sight of her.

"Are you sorry?" she asked, but there was coquetry and not doubt in the eyes she turned to him.

"But you shouldn't," he repeated, mechanically.

"Why not?" she said. "This is my house, you built it for me. And these are practically your clothes, for it was through you I obtained them."

"Goodness knows whose clothes they are," he replied with a ruthful smile, feeling wholly inadequate to the situation.

"Who's particular in earthquake time," she said scornfully.

He recalled her repudiation of his looting on the morning of the shock, but her inconsistency failed to arouse any sense of humour within him.

"But times are changing. They are different now," he said, battling bravely with

the temptation with which she faced him. "Why," he tried to be jovial, though his lips felt stiff, "I even saw a car on Fillmore Street to-day."

"Pooh, that's nothing," she answered jauntily, "I was in one. I met a friend. She laughed at my clothes, but I told her they weren't half as funny as hers were. She wore a ball skirt, and an opera wrap and a hat with plumes. We had such a laugh over it. She had only saved her best clothes. She looked like a circus lady, as you may imagine."

He sat nonplussed, his heart beating madly.

She looked the incarnation of spoiled womanhood, with all the irresistible charm of naughtiness in her whole bearing. But he realised, none the less, that this easy front was backed by a will, armed and upon the defensive.

He spoke slowly.

"You should go back to your friends, the Bells," he said, the words cutting him with a sense of actual physical pain. "This tent is no adequate protection for you now."

"Aren't you here?" she asked, leaning a trifle nearer to him.

He withdrew like a monk, shutting his teeth and suppressing a sharp-drawn breath.

"But it was different then. Now times are changing, readjusting themselves; conditions are normalising; convention once again taking hold."

He spoke mechanically. The words sounded in his ears like a leading article in a daily journal. He was fighting back all the man in him with both hands.

"What are the Bells to me?" she cried. "No great friends, hardly more than well-developed acquaintances. I've entertained them—they have entertained me. That's all." Her face glowed as she looked him squarely in the eyes. "They would have put you out if they knew the truth."

It sounded a cruel thing to say, and he bowed his head in silence.

"And Colonel Merriton! He judged you. You told him and he judged you. What part have I with them, or him?"

"Oh, Gwen, Gwen," he murmured hopelessly.

"Yes, he judged you, and they would. They are so secure, so honest, so sure of themselves. I have lived through it all in the lines of your face. I've watched, and," she threw back her head in triumph, "I've believed."

He looked at her amazed. Her face was transfigured.

"Who are these good people? Half the time they are just people who haven't been tempted, simple people who spend their lives in thanking God they are not as other men are. What is their morality? An accident; good luck!"

"Gwen, you must not," he protested. He could not endure these words from her lips.

"And what are many other good people? Just words, words, words, with evil in their hearts; cautious, respectable people. Are they good?"

The fire sprang up and bathed her face in a golden glory. He shook his head despondingly. She went on:

"I'll tell you the men or the women who are worth calling good—they are the men or the women who have been tempted—

fallen it may be—but who still have the courage to come back, with the stain upon them, to come back and live for their ideals. To live above the sneers about them; to live above the whispered record of their ill-deeds, sent from mouth to mouth by the people who are so quick to respond with mechanical lips to the words: 'Love thy brother as thyself' in the church on Sunday mornings."

"Don't, Gwen," he still murmured.

She sprang to her feet.

"I'll have no part nor lot with them," she cried. " I don't want them and they don't need me. This earthquake has shaken us all together—the poor with the rich, the evil with the good. I don't want to go back and begin it all over again, just the paltry grind that spells nothing when one sums up one's life. I want to live! I want to live!"

She wrung her hands in a sort of impatient anguish. Life had taught him more, and he was still.

"I've made up my mind," she said a moment later as she again sat watching the fire, "that I'm going to work—down among

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the poor people who need me. They don't need me over there," she nodded toward the houses outlined against the sky. "I've a friend, a dear friend in an eastern city. She'll teach me how; I'm so ignorant just now, like a little child. I don't even know how to help."

Her head drooped despondently.

She was going away, Travers thought, and it was best, but it was bitterer than death. He knotted his hands one over another and was silent, his head bent forward so that in the failing light she could not see his features.

"What are you going to do?" she asked at last, her voice faint and troubled.

He raised a stern, white face.

"Going to stay and lend a hand, God willing."

He was silent long. Then a soft hand, with a touch like a little child's, closed over his for an instant.

"Perhaps after a while, when we've both learned to work and to live—you won't send me away again."

He did not answer. He looked out over the growing darkness. There he saw pic-

tures of a struggle—a struggle with old difficulties, old suspicions which must rise up and face him again; but he also saw work.

Even in the darkness the faint shadow of the city was discernible, a waste—flat, desolate, deserted, where a few days earlier life had been rife. Here arose a gaunt chimney, standing up in the gloom like a ghost; there appeared a tottering wall, a menace and a mockery.

Just so lay his life!

But amid the murkiness spread before him, he espied a tiny light, gliding with purpose and design; then another. They were the lights of the electric cars, the only line that had as yet been put into operation; but it was a promise, and he welcomed it.

"Dearest," he said to Gwen, his voice tense with the struggle, "you know how utterly I love you. Perhaps one day, if with another sunrise all this dream has not vanished away, it may be I shall feel myself a man again, and then——"

"And then?" said Gwen.

But she was content that the sentence

should end thus. In both their hearts she knew it read complete.

"And now," said Travers, "I'll take you back to the Bells'."

THE END

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